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The Hidden Hand; or, Will Wildfire's Revenge.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "BOB ROCKETT, THE BANK RUNNER," "BOB ROCKETT, THE BOY DODGER," "WILL WILDFIRE," ETC., ETC.



"DOWN WITH YOU!" CRIED THE DOCTOR WITH A DIABOLICAL UTTERANCE. "GO SEEK YOUR FOE THERE!"

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OR,

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CHAPTER I.

A CUP OF MEDICATED COFFEE.

It was near the close of a fine November day. The cheerful "Indian Summer" warmth had made the midday sun delightful, but a frosty chill was in the air now that the evening shadows were descending, and the gloom of night succeeding to the day's brightness.

In a primitive cabin, built on the slope of the hills bordering a narrow valley, two men were seated, close to the fire, which pleasantly dispelled the chill of the evening air.

One of them had just entered the cabin, after lingering for a few moments upon the mountain slope, to look down upon the scattered village built in the valley, and to gaze upward upon the distant mountain-peaks, which gleamed in the rays of the fast sinking sun.

But the beauty and grandeur of the scene appeared to have had no pleasant influence upon his mind. His brows were contracted and his lips closed with a stern expression, as he took the seat opposite his companion, and bent his looks in gloomy silence upon the stove.

The other, a stout, powerfully-built man, with a somewhat sinister expression of countenance, fixed his eyes furtively upon his silent comrade, a peculiar look of malignity gathering upon his dark face. For several minutes they sat thus, neither speaking.

Then the stout man took from the stove a pan in which a slice of bacon had been sputtering in hot haste to be done, and dished it out upon a battered plate, which formed part of the contents of the supper-table, spread near them.

"Come, Mr. Wildfire; supper is waiting."

Will Wildfire—for the gloomy inmate of the hut was a person with whom most of our readers are already acquainted—stirred impatiently at this summons.

"I do not want any supper," he said.

"See here, my dear sir," replied the other, in a decided tone, "that will not do at all. You have had a hard day's tramp, and you cannot keep up without eating."

"I have no appetite," answered Will, testily.

"Well, then, force one. You must eat, and that is the whole of it."

The young man's eyes flashed up at this tone of authority. But the next instant he broke into a hoarse laugh.

"Very well," he said. "I will eat, if I must."

The other speaker had his back to the table, reaching for something in a rude closet in a corner of the hut. A dark expression of satisfaction came upon his face at these words. Had Will been attending to him he might have seen him pour, from a vial in his hand, a few drops of a greenish fluid into the teacup which he was handling.

"I suppose I ought to eat," continued Will, with a shrug of his shoulders. "That strange weakness seems to be growing on me. What can it be? Is there any sort of mountain fever about here, that takes hold of new comers?"

"Nothing serious," was the reply. "You are only getting broken in to the air of the hills. You will be like a young ox for strength before a week."

He poured out two cups of coffee as he spoke, and handed Will the one in which he had dropped the greenish liquid.

"Our cows have all run dry," he remarked, with a grim laugh. "We will have to take our coffee without cream."

"Is it that that gives it such a confoundedly strange taste?" asked Will. "I have noticed it ever since we struck the hills."

"It isn't first-class coffee," was the reply, while the speaker fixed his eyes on Will with the look of a hyena waiting for its prey.

"I don't fancy it," rejoined Will, pushing aside the cup from which he had taken but a sip. "I prefer cold water."

"But you need something to strengthen you."

"Do I? Since when have you started your coffee cure, Dr. Tod?"

"Well, if you won't drink coffee, you won't, that's all," answered the doctor testily. "But there is not much hope for a patient who knows so much better than his doctor what is good for him."

As he spoke he took Will's cup, and flung its contents upon the floor of the hut. The young man looked at him in astonishment.

"What did you do that for?" he asked.

"You need stronger medicine," replied the doctor, as he took a flask from his pocket, and poured the cup half full of a liquid which had a suspicious odor of whisky.

"Drink that," he ordered. "There is a nerve tonic for you."

The supper proceeded, with scraps of indifferent conversation, Will barely tasting the liquor poured out for him.

"It has something of the same taste as the coffee," he remarked, with a grimace.

"Medicated whisky, maybe," laughed the doctor.

Supper over, the inmates of the house were not long in stretching themselves on the rude cots which occupied one side of the room. The night passed quietly, though rather sleeplessly to Will. He seemed restless, and in pain, for he rose and walked the floor for several hours of the night.

An early hour in the morning found them standing on the narrow level in front of the cabin, looking down on the mining village below them.

"At last I hope that he is within my reach," and Will's eyes burned with a deep passion.

"The murderous hound who killed the woman I loved, beside the altar. You have had your day, Robert Wetherly. But, the hour of vengeance is near at hand. I have tracked the whole country for you; and would track it ten times over but that I find you in your lurking place, and revenge on you your dark deed of murder."

"That is all very well, Mr. Wildfire," remarked the doctor, impatiently. "But are you not growing morbid on that question? You want a little healthy hard work to tone up your nerves, and the Crescent mine is just the place for you to get it. There is a fortune in the rocks there for you."

Will's eyes fixed themselves with a suspicious look upon the speaker. The latter stood with an affected nonchalance of attitude, though evidently not quite easy under that searching glance.

"Was it that I came here for?" asked Will, angrily.

"No, but—"

"You knew where Robert Wetherly was in hiding! You lured me here with that bait! By the gods, if you are deceiving me—"

"No, no," was the hasty interruption. "We are close upon his track. But you give way too easily to fits of passion. There is fever in your blood; and in your cheeks too, this morning. You are entirely unfit to deal with an enemy in your present state of health."

"Oh! then you would like me to take to bed, and put myself under a course of medicine?"

"I think you need it."

Will laughed, with a hollow sound.

"If you are seeking to deceive me, John Tod, I should advise you to beware! You may be playing with edge tools."

"Deceive you!" and Tod held up his hands in deprecation. "Well, you are the oddest fellow! I wonder what crank you will take into your head next?"

Will said nothing for a minute. He seemed to be observing some human figures which were moving in the streets of the mining town. He then turned sharply toward the hut, as he half ordered:

"Let us take our breakfast."

They turned into the cabin, where a pot of hot coffee was steaming on the stove. It was the only hot part of the meal.

A manipulation of the cups, similar to that which had taken place the evening before, was gone through at the closet. Will was standing, with his hand on the sill of the narrow window, looking out. But he turned sharply at the very instant that the doctor dropped the liquid from the vial. The movement was hidden by the doctor's body, but Will was, by chance, in a position giving him a sidewise glimpse of it. A flash shot across his face and he made a hasty step forward; but instantly recovering himself he walked to the stove, where he stood, spreading his fingers over the genial warmth. The doctor had no idea that his action had been observed.

In a few minutes afterward they were seated at the table. The doctor poured out two cups

of coffee, and passed the manipulated cup to Will.

"You had best try and drink your coffee this morning," he said, with a soft utterance. "You need strength, and there is nothing stimulates a man better."

"That is very true," answered Will, stirring his coffee with an absent air, while his eyes rested dreamily on the walls of the cabin. "It was at the Golden Gulch mine, you said, that Wetherly was to be found? Five miles down the valley, was it not?"

"Eh? Oh, yes! I was thinking of something else—A good five miles."

"Very well. I shall go down into the town this morning.—Your bacon needs seasoning, doctor. Where is the pepper-bottle?"

"In the closet, I fancy," replied the doctor, rising to get it.

No sooner was his back turned than Will, with an alert movement, shifted the two cups of coffee. When the doctor turned again he was lazily stirring his spoon in his cup. He followed this by sipping several spoonfuls of the hot beverage. A look of malign satisfaction marked the doctor's face.

"I hope your appetite is returning," he remarked. "I don't like to see you doing without food."

"I won't starve," averred Will, quietly shaking the pepper upon his meats.

The doctor commenced to eat. As was his fashion he let his coffee stand untouched, though he furtively watched Will's sipping of the brown-hued liquid.

The doctor at length raised the cup to his lips, and took a deep draught of the slightly-cooled beverage. Will's eyes were fixed in a careless manner upon his face.

He set the cup down with a hasty movement, and glanced sharply at Will, who was just then lifting a spoonful to his lips.

"What is the matter, doctor?"

"Nothing. Nothing whatever."

"I am afraid you burned your mouth. You drink your coffee entirely too hot."

"Oh no! I am used to drinking it hot."

They continued to eat, in silence for several minutes. The doctor's face wore a look of disquiet. He cast strange glances at Will, who did not appear to observe them.

"But you are not living up to your own advice, doctor," persisted Will. "You insist on my drinking coffee; yet you let your own stand untouched."

"I am not an invalid," replied the doctor, with a sickly effort to smile.

"But you will be if you neglect your nerve tonic. I see I must turn doctor, and insist on your taking your own medicine. I have nearly emptied my cup. You must empty yours."

"Must?"

"It is a strong word, isn't it? Yes, you really must."

An odd smile marked Will's face. But there was a keen glitter in his eyes which the doctor did not altogether like. He took up his cup, but set it down again after a gentle sip.

"Is that what you call a strong hearty drink, which you are always advising me to take?" asked Will. "Why, I would not give a cent for a man who does not live up to his own theories. Come, come, my dear sir, I am doctor now. I insist on your drinking your coffee."

A slight pallor came upon the doctor's face. He looked uneasily at Will, who was leaning slightly forward over the table, that odd smile still upon his lips.

The doctor raised the cup to his mouth. He held it there for an instant.

"Are you not a little too arbitrary, Mr. Wildfire?" he asked, with an effort to smile.

In an instant Will had sprung up, and caught the cup in one hand and the doctor's head in the other. A tilting of the cup, and backward bending of the head, and the beverage poured down his throat, unresisted in his surprise.

"That is the way we used to make children take medicine," announced Will, laughing as he set down the cup.

The doctor sprang to his feet, choking and coughing, while his face was purple with mingled rage and suffocation.

"Don't choke so, my good sir," remarked Will quietly. "It is not good for your health. You will not go down to the town, then? Very well. I shall be back in an hour or two."

Will left the cabin whistling, while the doctor continued to cough and choke.

"By my life!" he said, as soon as he found his breath. "I will be even with you yet, you young hound! Thank Heaven I did not use the other dose, or I would be a gone sheep."

CHAPTER II.
A PERILOUS PASS.

THE small mining-town which bore the euphonious title of Gulchville, was of the mushroom growth which such towns usually display. Built rudely, of half-worked timber, some of the edifices seemed already about to tumble in upon their careless proprietors. Others were more substantial, while some even made pretensions to style. These were usually the stores which supplied the miners with an extensive variety of goods, the hotels and the gambling saloons, the latter the most flourishing institutions in the town, and the sinking-fund in which the miners deposited the greater part of their hard-earned money.

Numbers of the parasites of all such towns lounged about the street, drunkards, gamblers, roughs of various persuasions, and the many sorts of men who manage by shrewdness or impudence to live off of the earnings of their hard-working fellow-townsmen.

Will Wildfire attracted no little attention from these loungers as he passed through the single street of the town. His compact, well-knit figure, and the open candor of his handsome face, could not but gain admiration in any community, while his frank aspect of countenance seemed to offer opportunities for the sharp practice of some of these shrewd worthies.

"Dun'no who th' thunder ther chap is," growled one red nosed individual. "On'y he steps out 's if he hed the price of all creation in his trowsers-pocket. I jedge, somehow, he's worth cultervatin'. Lo 'ks sorter innocent."

"New grist for the mill," muttered a keen-eyed fellow, who was dressed in very expanded plaids. "Don't look as if he'd shuffled a deck in his life, except in fun. A New Yorker, I should calculate. We'll have to initiate the young gentleman."

Will passed on with little heed of these worthies, made the purchases which were the object of his visit to the town, and started on his return to the cabin where he had left the doctor, under the unpleasant influence of his own medicine.

Will laughed to himself as he thought of this scene.

"Tod's a good-hearted sort of a fellow," he said, to himself. "But I felt suspicious of him when I caught him dosing my coffee-cup. After all, though, I refused to swallow his prescriptions several days ago, and this may be his scheme to get his bitter stuff down my throat. There's nothing suits quacks like Tod better than to pour their nasty mixtures into their patients, but I fancy that I've given friend Tod a lesson not to practice it on me. If I catch him at it again, hang me if I don't make him swallow his whole medicine-chest."

The unsuspicious young man soon reached the cabin, where he found Tod with a very pallid countenance, and a decidedly grim expression.

"How do you feel, Doc?" asked Will, with a lurking smile.

"First rate. First rate," assured Tod, endeavoring to look cheerful.

"Glad to hear it, my boy. I was afraid your coffee would not agree with you."

Tod suppressed an oath.

"Hang you!" he ejaculated, with an assumption of innocence. "What made you do that? You nearly choked me."

"Because I am not to be coaxed nor cheated into taking medicine which I don't want, friend Tod. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"Oh!" groaned Tod. "So that's how the cat jumps? Bless me if I didn't think you were gone crazy."

Yet there was a feeling of relief in his mind. Will did not suspect his real object, then? So far he was safe. But some new course of action must be taken if he was to carry out his deep-laid schemes.

An hour afterward found the two men walking down the mountain-slope toward the valley. There was a peculiarly stern and resolute expression upon Will's countenance. He walked with a springy and vigorous step. The fresh mountain air and the November chill had driven away his lassitude. And perhaps the fact that he had escaped the doctor's doses aided in this healthy vigor.

As for Doctor Tod he was heavy and dull. He put his hand frequently to his head as if it pained him, which there was something devilish in the look which he occasionally fixed on his unconscious companion.

They proceeded for several miles down the valley, few words being exchanged between them. On both sides the mountains rose, usually very abruptly. The valley, indeed, was

little more than the bed of an old ravine, through which a mountain stream had probably once passed.

"Are we near the Golden Gulch?" asked Will, turning to his companion.

"It is several miles distant yet," replied the doctor, as he seated himself upon a large boulder. "And our path now leads over the hills. I hardly feel able for it this morning."

He gazed on the ground at his feet with a doubtful but somber expression.

"By Heaven! you have got to go on," cried Will energetically. "The eagle does not come so near his prey to turn back. My foe is to be found in that mine, you say. To that mine then you shall lead me, if we have to creep there together."

"You needn't be so gruff about it," protested Tod, with an injured air. "I'm of a notion that your temper's getting spoiled."

"Yes, whenever I think of that murderous wretch, it makes my whole soul burn with passion! By the gods, Tod, if I once get my hands upon him, he will not easily escape!—And if you are deceiving me, as you sometimes make me suspect—"

"No, no," interrupted Tod, alarmed at Will's savage tone. "Let us go on. I feel stronger now."

They resumed their walk in silence. Tod now led up from the bed of the ravine. The slope of the mountain side was here less steep, and a sort of pathway offered a difficult passage to the feet. But it was no easy ascent. Sometimes they had to drag themselves up by the aid of strong shrubs. At others they had to clamber over great fallen masses.

But Will seemed to make little of these obstacles. His face was set and stern. A deadly glitter gleamed in his eyes. His gaze was bent onward as if he saw his foe in the air before him. The force of an overmastering passion was in his every step.

His companion, on the contrary, appeared sullen and morose. The gleam that occasionally shone from his eyes was of ferocity rather than of passion. It was the glare of the hyena rather than the flash of the lion. And this look of dark ferocity, with which seemed mingled a sense of fear, was fixed on no distant foe. It fell on the form of Will Wildfire, as if it was against him that the sullen fury of the doctor was excited.

The mountain path had been followed for nearly a mile, and they had attained a considerable elevation, when they reached a most dangerous point in their journey. The broad track they had so far followed suddenly narrowed until it was but a foot or two in width, with a sheer precipice passing upward and downward, only broken by this narrow shelf of rock.

The lower descent was partly covered with trees at its base, while shrub-oak and pine clung here and there to its sides, rooting into crevices in the rock where a little soil cohered. The upper precipice was bare, and almost perpendicular.

They could not tell from the point at which they stood how far this difficult pathway extended, for the rock curved so as to hide its further extremity.

Will looked at it with a critical eye. There was not a trace of dread on his face.

"Is it safe beyond the curve?" he asked.

"Yes. That is, it used to be. I have not been over it for some months."

"Is there much more of it than we see?"

"Perhaps ten feet."

"Lead on then."

Tod had seated himself and was resting his chin on his hand. He looked at the dangerous pass with a dubious expression.

"I am afraid my nerves are too much shaken this morning."

"Then give me the route to the Gulch mine. I will go on, if there be fire and steel in my path!"

This energetic expression aroused the morose doctor.

"If you are ready to lead over the pass I am ready to follow," he sullenly answered.

"Come on then."

Will trod out upon the narrow pass as though it were an open road. He was closely followed by the doctor. The latter no longer sought to conceal his expression. It had become almost a murderous ferocity. He kept close behind Will, treading like one who was too well accustomed to the path to dread its peril.

On nearing the curve the pass grew so narrow that they were obliged to proceed with the utmost caution, setting each foot securely before they ventured to lift the next. In this way several yards of the narrow spot were safely

passed. The route grew wider again where it turned around the curve.

Will had now caught sight of the end of the perilous pass, it widening into a broad opening about fifteen feet ahead.

"If the miners have to follow this track," he remarked, "I wonder they don't do some blasting here. Safety is worth as much as silver."

There was no reply. He heard a sound like a gasp for breath behind him. The next moment he felt himself grasped in a vise-like grip, the upper part of his arms being held as in clasp of iron, while the hot breath of the doctor burned like the vapor of a furnace on his neck.

The vigor of those strong arms was bending him forcibly outward. A sort of subdued growl came from behind him. Taken by surprise as he was he braced his feet firmly on the rock, and sought to writhe around to confront his foe. Who could it be that had seized him in this deadly grasp? He could not believe it was Doctor Tod.

"Loose your hold, villain!" yelled Will.

"Never!" came the panting reply. "You tried to poison me this morning. It is my turn now. You would find your foe! Go seek him down there!"

The strength of that strong grip doubled. The breath of the villain on Will's neck seemed to burn like a hot iron. He felt himself slowly yielding. Young and vigorous as he was he could not well resist when taken at such a disadvantage. He grasped at the precipitous rock. In vain, there was no supporting angle for his hand. He writhed around until he caught a glimpse of the ferocious face behind him. It seemed that of a wild beast rather than of a man, with its glaring eyes, suffused cheeks, and glittering teeth.

A shudder passed through Will's frame. Grasped by the arms as he was by the powerful hands of his large framed companion, he strove in vain to turn or to tear himself loose. He bent outward over the precipice, whose bottom his eyes vainly sought in its mass of shrouding trees. He felt his footing give way. He was only supported by the grasp of the villain.

"Down with you!" cried the doctor, with diabolical utterance. "Go seek your foe there!"

His hands suddenly loosed their hold. Will tottered and fell. A loud cry, the first he had given, burst from his lips, as he felt himself in the open air, falling down the sheer precipice.

There was a sound of crashing boughs, a heavy thud, and all was over.

The murderer, who had been flung to his knees by the reflex force of his efforts, clutched the rock with his fingers opened like claws, and looked fearfully down the precipice.

Nothing was visible. The body of his victim had disappeared among the shrouding bushes, which here rather thickly covered the face of the rock.

"That job is done," he muttered, crawling along until he could rise to his feet. "Wetherly has won in the game for life and death. For his foe is forever off his track. And now for my reward."

He turned and retraced his steps along the pass. In a minute or two he had regained the open passage, along which he walked without once looking back.

He disappeared into the heart of the rocks. Silence only ruled over the scene of the murderous deed. All life seemed to have vanished.

Five minutes afterward another sound was heard. Two men appeared around a corner of rock from the opposite direction to that in which the murderer had fled. They were dressed in rough mining garbs, and had weather-beaten but honest faces.

"It were a queer cry, Joe," said one, as he entered upon the narrow path. "The chap as give that was in trouble."

"Look below there, Tom. See how the bushes are smashed!"

"By the blazes, yer right! And"—his voice sunk into a deep whisper, "as I'm a livin' man, there's blood upon them. It's murder, Joel! Some un's been flung down the slope. See here. Here's marks of a tussle. See where the dirt's been kicked up."

"He's past help, poor devil, whoever it is," answered Joe. "But the murderer can't be far. He's on the back track. Let's arter him."

They, too, disappeared from the fatal spot, and silence again ruled supreme.

CHAPTER III.

WHAT WAS FOUND IN THE MOUNTAIN BASIN. THE town of Gulchville was in a sudden uproar. To be sure, murder was not so uncommon an event in that delectable region that the

inhabitants should let it trouble their dreams. But yet it had been a good week since the last man was shot, a chap who had raised a ridiculous row over being cheated in a game of bluff, and whom his disgusted partner had found it necessary to quiet with a bullet.

The town was growing ridiculously tame. This was a sort of stagnation which the worthy townsmen did not approve of, and there was a sense of pleasant excitement in the news that a man had been flung from Grasshopper Pass, down ninety feet of a dead fall.

"We have tracked the murderer," explained the two miners, who had discovered the crime. "He followed the Gulch path down to the lower level, for his track was plain there in a bit of soft ground. Then he struck to'rds the town. We sighted his boot-mark ag'in not a quarter mile back."

The listeners looked questioningly at one another. No person had entered the town inside of an hour; that they were sure of. An excited conversation took place. Who could these two men be, the murderer and his victim?

"See here, folks," broke out the red-nosed fellow who had commented on Will that morning. "Yer hain't fergot, I s'pose, that high-steppin' colt as come trottin' inter town a matter o' two hours back? That chap with a b'iled shirt and a plug hat, who looked's if he come to buy Gulchville?"

"I saw him," answered the man with the plaid suit. "A young fellow, who looked as quiet and innocent as a lamb. One of the sort as are brung up on Sunday school pap."

"Now don't you deal sich a hand as that fer to play with," said a third, "or ye mought git nipped tremendous. I s'pose ye've all heered of steel kivered with velvet?"

"And what if we have?"

"He's that sort. Ye 'didn't catch the coon's eye, maybe. Jist take my advice, and if he comes cavortin' round yere, don't try to play on him. That fish won't bite."

The conversation continued for some minutes, it being gradually decided that the young stranger must have been in some way concerned in the crime which they were met to discuss.

"I see'd the very chap," announced a person who had just joined the group. "It weren't short o' two hours back. There were two o' them, the young chap, and a stout feller in a slouch hat. They struck down the gulch toward the diggins."

"But where did they come from?"

"From the east slope. Mought 'a' come from Ransom's old cabin on the hill. It's been empty since the old coon pegged out, ye know."

Here was a possible clew. Little as they troubled themselves about dead men, they were decidedly of the opinion that the hangman's rope was the best necklace for a murderer. Of course if it had been a fair stand up shot, there might have been something to say on both sides. But this looked like a bit of cold-blooded slaughter, and men's eyes grew fierce and their lips firmly set as they looked to the charges of their pistols, and set their feet to the steep slope that led upward to the old cabin.

But the two miners, with a couple of volunteers, turned back down the valley.

"We're diggin' a bit in the dark yet," said one of them. "Ther' was somethin' human, and with blood in its veins, went down that rock. And whosoever or whatsoever it were, it's our Christian duty to give it a decent funeral."

"It's no easy thing to git inter that hole, under the cliff," replied the other. "I tried it once prospectin', and hed to give up. But, as you say, Joe, 'tain't silver nor gold we're arter now, but human flesh and blood. The poor devil mought be alive, too."

"That's impossible," answered Joe, decidedly. "If he was made o' wrought iron he'd be flattened, arter such a tumble."

Providing themselves with axes, to enable them to cut through the thicket of brambles and shrubs which choked the entrance to the fatal hollow, the four men set off on their journey down the valley. The point they sought was some two miles distant, a mere trifle to these fast-stepping mountaineers.

They grew silent as they approached the locality of the supposed fatal event. It was a dark, somber region. The valley, or ravine, grew here very contracted and rough, passing at one point through what was little more than a cleft in the rocks, which had been widened out by the long action of water.

It was only wide enough for a man to pass with outstretched arms, with the rock shelving slightly away on one side, and stretching vertically upward on the other, to a height of fifty

feet. Behind this upright cliff lay the hole into which the murdered man had fallen, and which the party of search sought to enter.

It was impossible to climb this perpendicular rock face. But the miners knew the locality too well to make any efforts in that direction. They strode on steadily through the narrow cleft, until the ravine opened out widely again, its rocky walls falling off on either side. The left-hand acclivity became an easy slope, but it continued steep on the right, though no longer perpendicular.

"Here's about the only easy way up," said the miner called Joe. "Round this big shoulder, and over the cow's back, yander. Then we have a matter of twenty feet that's like a high-road, and, arter that, a pull or two more 'll fetch us to the top."

The two townsmen, who were not broken in to rock climbing, did not have a very lofty opinion of Joe's high-road, when they found that it led at an angle of forty degrees over a smooth slope, with scarcely a trace of a foothold. But it was plain sailing as compared with the twenty feet beyond, which it took some shrewd pushing and pulling to surmount.

Finally, however, all these difficulties were passed, and the searching party stood on an edge of rock that looked down into a deep declivity on the other side.

This formed a sort of mountain basin, surrounded on all sides by steep walls, and from a quarter to a half mile in diameter. It was filled with a thick grove of oaks and pines, whose tops came up to the feet of the party who now looked out upon its dark green summits, spread out like a level plain before their eyes.

On the opposite side of the basin the mountain walls rose much higher, being some five hundred feet high, and nearly vertical at the point directly across the basin.

"There's our ground," remarked Joe, as he pointed across the basin. "Yander's Grasshopper Pass, stretchin' along yon rock."

"Devil the pass do I see," answered one of the townsmen, shading his eyes with his hand, and looking intently across.

"There it is, along the face of the rock, as plain as day," growled Joe.

"Maybe so; but my eyes ain't got up to pick out a spider's web at a half mile off. Strike out, then, if you've got your bearings."

"It's jist where the rock turns that we twigg'd the bloody bush," remarked Tom, the other miner. "The sun glints on the spot at this minute. I calkerlate we ought to make a bee-line, Joe."

Joe made no reply, but started down the slope of the rock, which here descended gradually toward the bottom of the basin. The others silently followed.

It was not long before they found use for their axes. There was here a good depth of soil, in which not only pines and oaks grew freely, but which also gave rooting to a dense growth of brambles and twisting vines, which seemed to forbid passage.

Only diligent application of their axes opened an available passage through this matted hedge that bordered the forest.

But strong arms and sharp blades soon cut a way through the twining hedge, that extended along the slope with a width of from twenty to fifty feet.

Reaching the floor of the basin, and entering the wood itself this difficulty vanished. They found themselves between straight, closely set trunks, almost branchless and leafless except near their summits, while the nearly level floor of the basin was strewn with dead pine cones, and with the needle-like leaves of the evergreens until it was like a soft carpet to the feet.

"Plain sailin' now, lads," cried Tom, as he hung his ax to his belt. "Lead ahead, Joe. You've got the best eye for bearin'."

"It's like as if a chap was at the bottom of a mine here," growled Joe. "The sun's near-away snuffed out by them pines. I calkerlate though I kin hit the mark within a frog's jump."

He strode on under the shadows of the mountain forest, and past the straight, thick-clustering trunks, some of them slender as a girl's waist, others of elephantine girth, and looking as if they bore a thousand years of growth on their sturdy shoulders.

But leaving them to pursue this journey over the cones and needles, and under the somber shades of the pine forest, we will dart on in advance in search of the object of their quest.

That Will Wildfire had been flung down the cliff the reader already knows. That he lay dead at the bottom was not so sure. He was not of the kind that die easily.

Ninety feet of fall is of course likely to prove fatal to any human being. But it must be a clear fall, and this was far from being the fact in Will's descent.

The precipice, though very steep, was not quite perpendicular. It afforded shelves for the retention of small quantities of soil, into which scrub oak and pine had rooted, creeping up the steep slope almost to the pass.

The miners had noticed a bloody spot on one of the bushes. This bush had, indeed, not only torn Will's sleeve, but had lacerated the flesh of his arm as well. But while doing him this injury it had aided him by slightly breaking his fall.

The remainder of his descent was through similar bushes, each of which caught at his clothes, or offered themselves to his grasping hands, for he kept his wits about him sufficiently to make every effort to break his fall.

His crashing descent through these bushes, then, was not unbroken, the slight slope of the rock also serving to render his fall less abrupt, so that the thud which the murderous wretch had heard from the bottom of the basin was by no means that of the crushed human body which he had pictured to his dark soul.

Will had fallen not on bare rock, but on a thick bed of the sheddings of a forest. As he lay there, however, pallid and motionless, he seemed at first sight torn into fragments. His clothes were rent until they hung in rags about him, while his flesh was torn and mangled until his whole body seemed bathed in blood, his rent clothing, and the bed upon which he lay, being drenched and crimsoned with this vital fluid.

Such was the spectacle upon which the searching party gazed, as they reached the spot at the foot of the cliff toward which their steps were directed.

They stopped for a moment in awe-struck silence, as this terrible vision met their eyes.

"Poor devil, he's ripped into rags," said Tom, pityingly, as he looked down in sympathy upon the seemingly lifeless body.

"By the saints, then, he isn't dead!" exclaimed Joe, who had knelt beside him, and placed his hand over his heart. "And badly as he's torn up, boys, I believe it's only outside work."

"Oh drop that," cried one of the townsmen. "To come down a dead ninety feet and have a whole bone left? It ain't in the wood."

"All right, my hearty," answered Joe, "but don't you lay your bets high on that idear. D'y'e see how his clothes are ripped? The breshes done that. And look at his hands. Why they're all in tatters. He's been tryin' to break his fall. And he's done it, too. The chap's got plenty of life in him yet."

At this announcement, given in a tone of decision, a marked change took place in the aspect of the party.

They at once commenced to bind up his wounds, with material which they had brought for that purpose; to check the flow of blood from those which were bleeding too freely; and to prevent the throbbing leap of the vital current from the arteries which had been cut; and all with the skill and tenderness which belongs to the hands of those whose rude life has given them experience in such important duties.

Finally the yet insensible man was placed upon a rude but strong litter, which their skillful hands had constructed, lifted upon the strong shoulders of his rescuers, and the long and difficult journey back to the town commenced, the slowly ebbing blood of the wounded man crimsoning the dry leaves of his couch, despite the efforts to quench this dangerous flow.

CHAPTER IV. A FRIENDLY GAME.

"THER aren't any sich coon in the mine. Why I knows it like I knows the alpherbet. Used to work in the Golden Gulch meself onc't. That was afore I took my weakness."

The red nose and the general appearance of the speaker seemed to hint that his weakness was not in his health but in his appetite. He picked up the empty tumbler beside him as he ceased talking, looked into it hopefully, and then laid it down with a sigh.

"Help yourself, friend Tope," said Will Wildfire, with a lurking smile. "There's a drop in the bottle yet; and it might help your weakness."

"All the doctors think ther's nothin' so good fer my complaint 's good whisky," remarked Tope, as he drained the bottle into his glass. "Somehow or 'nother it seems to git to the very p'int of the trouble."

"It gets to the point of your nose, anyhow," laughed Will. "But about that man, Tope. He may have changed his name."

"Dang the name!" answered Tope. "There's no sich coon there, I tell you. It's a sell, squar' out. The chap as flung you down the rocks was playin' on you."

"I am afraid so," rejoined Will.

But his visitor was not listening to him. He had the tumbler to his lips, and was slowly elevating it. A peculiar gurgle was heard in his throat, and a look of supreme satisfaction came upon his face, as the strong liquor slowly slipped downward. He looked as if a month of such enjoyment would have been none too much for his thirsty soul.

Will seemed to have almost entirely recovered from his wounds. Three or four weeks had passed since the date of the attempted murder, and the numerous hurts which he had received were nearly all healed. Fortunately they were all flesh wounds. He had escaped without a broken bone, or any deep-laid injury.

"I begin to feel like a man again," he said, as he walked from the open door of the tavern, in which he had been domiciled during these weeks of illness. He stood on the porch, in the winter sunshine, looking down the broad street of Gulchville, paved by the native rock of the mountain valley.

Tope followed him out. He was not willing to lose sight of the angel he had just found.

"I have two men to settle with, now," remarked Will, as a stern look settled upon his face. "Doctor Tod escaped from the good folks of Gulchville. He may not find it so easy to escape me."

"I was in that bizness," cried Tope, with enthusiasm. "If he hadn't cavorted like a greased pig, we'd nabbed him sure. And you know what turns up when a Gulchville Vigilancer gits a grab on a coon like that. We're kinder apt to make him break his neck with his own weight. The chap must have smelt a rat, fur he snorted out in 'mazing quick meter."

Will turned on his heel to get away from this loquacious bore.

"And took all my money with him," he said, to himself, as he walked back into the hotel. "Here am I, living like a prince off my host's provender, and feeding old Tope with whisky because he claims to have helped save my life. How I am ever going to get to Gulchville, or how I am to pay the long reckoning which must be growing against me, is more than I would venture to say. The landlord looks at me now as if he was getting dubious. I expect every day to see a bill poked at me, shorter than his conscience maybe, but a fearful sight longer than my purse."

Will clearly stated his position in this soliloquy. Tod had not only made his escape, but had rifled Will's valise of all its funds, and left him in a serious quandary. It would have been no easy matter to leave Gulchville on foot, even if it had been summer. To leave it by stage needed more money than he was the possessor of. The landlord of the Miner's Rest, and the doctor who had attended on him, showed no disposition to act the part of the philanthropist. Will had kept such a stiff upper lip that they naturally supposed that he must be well supplied with funds. And he had given his orders at the hotel as profusely as if he were a young nabob, at least.

"I am not strong enough to work in the mines," he soliloquized, as he walked down the street of Gulchville. "And what's more, I must get back to Chicago as soon as possible. It was there that Tod was put upon my track. The whole business was a scheme to lure me out here, and to make way with me if I would not rest quiet here. Chicago is the spot, then, in which I am not wanted. All right, gentlemen. I can see through your little dodge, and Chicago is my game."

There came lounging up the street toward him the sharp-faced man in the plaid suit, who had previously felt so interested in him.

"Here is another of those gentlemen who saved my life," said Will to himself. "It is astonishing what a lot of persons took part in saving my life. And the worst of it is they all fancy that I belong to them, body and purse. This chap hasn't shown his hand yet, but I know he is wanting something."

"Why, good-day, Mr. Wildfire," said the man, with enthusiasm. "I'm glad enough to see you. There's some virtue in young blood, after all, or you wouldn't have been out for a month yet. Or not at all, I fancy, if we folks hadn't been spry."

"Yes; saved my life. I knew what was coming," thought Will, with an inward groan.

"I've a notion that I'm myself again," he remarked, aloud. "I don't belong to the kind that's easy killed."

"I judge so. A fine December day, isn't it? Only a little nipping. Too cold for you to be about."

"Not at all," answered Will.

"Yes, it is," positively. "Your face is looking blue. You had best just step into my place and warm up. And, if you want amusement, I can treat you to a bit of as neat sport as there is going."

"Sport?" asked Will.

"Yes. A social set-to at the cards, if you like. Any game you please, to pass the time. Euchre, bluff, or old sledge—anything for a trifle of amusement, you know."

"Where is your place?" asked Will.

"Just opposite here. The Full Deck. That's a neat sign, eh? Any chap that's in for a square, straight game, that's the place for him. You look like a fellow that has shuffled the papers."

"Yes; a little," answered Will, carelessly, as he gave a quick look at his companion.

That was his caliber, then? A professional gambler. He wondered that he had not known it at sight, for it was written plainly on the man's face.

"I don't care if I do take a look at the inside of your establishment," remarked Will, in his most nonchalant manner.

A gleam of satisfaction shot over the gambler's face. Evidently he fancied that he was leading in a sheep to the slaughter.

The apartment they first entered was a drinking saloon, fitted up with an effort at smartness that gave it a glaring effect. Several persons were seated around the room, among others the two miners to whom Will really owed his rescue from his perilous situation.

They said nothing, however, though they looked with a peculiar interest at the handsome young man, in whose face only a shade of pallor showed the long illness he had passed through.

"Won't you drain a glass with me? I can offer you a prime article," asked the gambler.

"I won't mind," answered Will.

But he took care to pour out a very small quantity of the strong liquor.

"Come, come, Mr. Wildfire. You will hardly wet your throat with that."

"That is all I care to do," replied Will, quietly. "An invalid hasn't the nerves of a hardened fellow like you."

The gambler laughed, as he led the way to an inner room.

The two miners looked at each other meaningly.

"Roped in," said Tom.

"Looks blazin' like it," answered Joe. "I s'pose the youngster's got cash. If he has Neil Dempster won't leave him as much as'd buy a slice of his thumb nail."

"Let's stroll in and see the fun."

The miners rose and walked back toward the room within which Will and the gambler had disappeared.

It was a large room, well fitted up with all the appurtenances for gambling. Several persons were present, trying their luck against the fickle goddess of chance.

Will and the gambler had seated themselves at an unoccupied table. The latter was easily shuffling over a pack of cards, as he kept up a lively conversation with Will.

"Yes. You will find it so. But what do you say if we try our hands at a game? Just for amusement, you know. I never play now except for a bit of sport. Life does grow confounded dull sometimes. What shall it be? For the matter of that, though, there is no game like poker."

"Make it poker, then," answered Will, indifferently.

"There's only one bad feature about it," continued the gambler. "It can't be played without a stake. But then we can make it light, as long as we are playing only for amusement. What do you say to a dollar ante?"

"As you please," replied Will, with the greatest nonchalance. He was the owner of just two dollars!

"I am badly out of practice. I suppose you will easily beat me," laughed Neil, as he dealt out two hands. "But, then, it will not cost us much if we don't bet high. What does your hand say?"

"It says pass," answered Will.

"Mine is worth a dollar bet," declared Neil laughingly, as he put up the money.

"I will see your bet," answered Will, taking his last dollar from his pocket with as easy an air as though he had left dozens behind it.

"Is a see your best? I fancied you were going to raise me. Call your hand."

"Two pairs," answered Will, showing his hand, with a pair of aces at the head.

The gambler smiled covertly. He had evidently got a very cautious fellow to play with. He must take some means to excite his opponent. There was no hope of a stake out of Will if that was his highest bet on such a hand.

The game went on for several minutes with fortune apparently inclining to Will's side. The little heap of money before him gradually increased. But there was no sign as yet in his demeanor of that excitement for which the gambler was waiting.

"I will go a five on that."

"My hand sees you," said Will, throwing down his cards.

"The devil!" whistled the gambler. "A full hand, and not raise the bet! Excuse me, but I gave you credit for more nerve. Rake in the pool; your hand wins."

The two miners, who stood behind Neil, looked at each other. Will's hand had not really won. Evidently the gambler was trying to induce him to bet higher, by letting this pool go by the board.

Will dealt the cards.

"I will go a ten on this," announced Neil.

"Just to see if I can waken you up."

"I will raise your ten to a hundred," Will quietly answered.

This change of tactics so astonished Neil that he failed to notice that Will had not put up his bet. Cautious as the young man had proved himself to be, he must be betting on a big hand. Neil failed to meet the bet.

"Rake it down," he said.

Yet his hand held three Jacks, while Will had but a pair of deuces. With the utmost unconcern Will laid his cards on the pack and drew in the money. He had now about thirty dollars before him.

He continued to play as before, being very cautious on the gambler's deal, but betting freely on his own deal. Neil's face showed signs of growing spleen. There was no telling where the cards were after Will had shuffled them. He mingled them too thoroughly for any combinations to work.

The game continued, with luck usually in Will's favor, for a half hour more. He had now about one hundred dollars on the table before him. Neil bit his lip as he again dealt the cards.

Will's eyes rested quietly upon his motions. He seemed to be admiring the graceful skill with which his opponent handled the pack.

Will passed.

"I bet a five," said Neil.

"Rake in the pool," returned Will.

The gambler stared. He knew that he had dealt Will a good hand, and himself a better. Was the young man growing more cautious than ever? He had intended to make that hand tell, and here it had not even brought out a bet.

"You are the most careful poker player I ever saw," remarked Neil, with an effort at pleasantness, as Will dealt the cards. "I suppose I am to rake down this pool too, with a five," he continued, as he laid his bet on the table.

"I see your bet and go twenty better."

Neil stared. He hesitated a moment, looked at his hand again, and then raised the bet to a fifty.

"Seventy-five," added Will.

There was a quick movement of Neil's hand as he again looked at his cards.

"Make it the even hundred," he answered, as he took some more money from his purse and laid it in the pool.

"I will see that bet," replied Will, pushing up the balance of his money.

"Is a see your bet?"

"Yes."

"I calculate then that I will rake down the pool."

He threw his cards, face upward, on the table, and reached out his hand for the money.

"Four Queens I fancy will win."

"Not much, when there are three Kings out," and Will threw down his cards and laid his hand on the pool.

"Three Kings?"

"Yes. I fancy that will beat three Queens. We will not count the fourth one, which you took from your sleeve."

Will drew the money toward him, and looked up coolly into the gambler's face.

The latter sprang to his feet, with a fierce oath, his face flushed with rage, a pistol in his hand.

"You infernal liar!" he yelled. "Drop that plunder, or I'll bore you!"

"Not much," answered Will, rising in his turn, and pointing to the floor. "Maybe you

will explain whose hand that card dropped out of."

"By the eternal blazes—!"

He suddenly paused. Before him stood the two miners, each with a revolver in his hand.

"Give in, Neil Dempster!" they cried. "You tried it on the young fellow, for we saw you. Now this gentlemen's our friend, and we're goin' to stand by him. If you ain't satisfied with that, then blaze away, and let's see who's got most bullets to waste."

Will quietly put the money in his pocket, and walked to the door of the room. He turned as he went out, and remarked:

"The next time you try to rake in a green-horn on a game of poker, just find out first what sort of wood he's made of."

The gambler groaned with rage as Will disappeared.

CHAPTER V.

A TRIP IN THE GULCHVILLE STAGE.

It had snowed in the night. Some six inches of snow covered the roofs and the streets of Gulchville, as Will walked out from the Miner's Rest, prepared to take his place in the stage that left that day for the nearest railway station, some thirty miles away.

He had paid his landlord and his doctor, and made old Tope as drunk as a fiddler, the night before, so that he felt perfectly free to shake the dust, or rather the snow-flakes, of Gulchville from his feet, and migrate in search of new scenes.

And he had, moreover, provided himself with another necessary of life in that part of the world. He had been caught unarmed in his little difficulty with Neil Dempster, and might have got into trouble but for his two mining friends. It was not safe to be caught in such a predicament in that lawless region, so he took care to have now a neat little revolver resting quietly in the depths of his pocket.

It seemed, too, as if he might find use for it. He had in fact, hardly walked a hundred yards down the single street of Gulchville before he came face to face with his gambling opponent, who was, like Will, plowing his way through the snow.

A heavy frown rested upon the face of the gambler. His hand kept suspiciously in his pocket as he glared with lowering brows into Will's face. Our friend stopped, thrust both hands into the depths of his pockets, and returned the gambler's stare.

"Well," asked Will. "Are you wanting some more satisfaction for saving my life? There might be some other little game, you know, that you would like to try on."

"See here, my friend," replied the gambler, with a look of fierce malignity, "you robbed me of two hundred dollars, by laying a plot with a gang of infernal cutthroats. But there ain't none of your gang around now, and if you don't hand over that stake instant—"

"What then?" asked Will.

The gambler had suddenly paused in his threatening speech on seeing the muzzle of a revolver staring him in the face. Will's eye covered him with a dangerous coolness, as his finger touched the trigger of his weapon.

"What then?" asked Will again. "Won't you please explain? I'm rather anxious to know what's to happen if I don't fork over."

Neil started back a step.

"Why blast your ugly eyes—" he began.

"Shut down on that!" cried Will quickly. "Take that hand from your pocket! And empty, too! Do you suppose you are playing with a baby, you rascally sour-faced fraud?"

Neil slowly withdrew his hand, dropping the pistol he held. He knew something of the meaning of men's eyes, and didn't quite like the expression of Will's.

"I held three kings last night," continued Will. "I hold one ace this morning. But I've a notion my ace will rake the pool. Are you satisfied yet that you tried to wasp me, by the sleeve game?"

"Hell's blazes, no! I held four queens! It was regular highway robbery!"

"I think I can satisfy you that you are mistaken," said Will quietly.

"You can, eh! I'd like to see you try it on. The gambler's hand sunk again into his pocket. Will's easy manner had emboldened him.

"All right," said Will, in a mild tone, as he lowered his pistol. "Just step back there ten paces, draw your pistol, and make ready to blaze away at the word. I'll give you the chance to prove your hand."

Neil looked into Will's quiet but resolute eye. He then walked back ten paces, paused irresolutely, and looked cautiously around him.

The street was empty of spectators. Will stood erect and motionless as a statue, his pistol hand at his side.

"Well," he asked, "are you ready to acknowledge to the three queens? Or do you want to prove the fourth queen by a bullet?"

Neil half drew his weapon. He then let it drop again into his pocket, and said, with a malignant smile:

"I will prove it yet, my crowing pullet. If you walk out of these diggings with Neil Dempster's funds, you'll have something to brag of that nobody ever had before."

He turned short on his heel, and walked away, followed by a taunting laugh from Will.

"A bully always was a coward," said our friend to himself. "But I must be on the lookout. The chap means mischief."

At eleven o'clock Will took the stage. It had been delayed an hour or two beyond its usual time of starting, and was not likely to reach its destination, over a snowed-up mountain road, until after dark. But the passengers, four in number, were all ready and anxious to make the journey, and the driver was a man who would not have stopped for six feet of snow; much less six inches.

The four strong horses drew the heavily-built vehicle out into the street of Gulchville. Will looked around for the gambler, who he half-expected would make some effort to carry out his threat. But he was not visible. He had evidently taken water badly, and Will smiled as the horses started at a brisk trot up the heavy street, quickly leaving behind them the threatening precincts of Gulchville.

The journey, however, would hardly have been attempted but that the snow-storm was now over, and a bright sun had succeeded the lowering clouds of the previous evening. For the route was in many places dangerous. In some portions of the road it passed through narrow ravines, into which the snow had drifted, until the laboring horses sunk to their bodies in the yielding material. In others it became dangerously steep, leading up sharp acclivities, from which fortunately most of the snow had been swept by the winds; and down steep descents that were perilous in the best of weather, and were now doubly difficult.

Yet the four powerful horses, skillfully handled by their well-trained driver, made their way safely over all these difficulties. The progress was much slower than usual, it is true, and it was near the hour of darkness when they finally crossed the steepest ridge of the route, and entered upon a comparatively level stretch of road.

Down this last long slope the coach had descended like an avalanche, the reckless coachman stirring up his animals with voice and whip, until they tore at full gallop down the steep declivity, the heavy coach bounding behind them as though it had but a feather's weight.

The passengers held their breath as they felt themselves tossed from side to side of the bounding vehicle, as it tilted on some protruding rock, and they were in momentary expectation of being hurled over some precipice, or flung helplessly forward on the backs of the horses, who snorted with spirit as they rushed onward at the top of their speed.

A single misstep might have dashed the whole party to ruin. But the animals were sure footed as mules, and they tore around the last short curve of the descent with a rattling swing, that almost lifted the coach from the ground and hurled it around in the air.

Two minutes more and they drew out upon the level, the animals slackening their speed as the wheels struck against a heavy drift of snow, while they panted violently from their late headlong speed.

"A level road now, and ten easy miles to Mink Station," announced the driver.

"Thank the Lord!" answered one of the passengers. "Won't some of you gentlemen please look at my hair, and see if it hasn't turned gray."

A laugh followed this plaintive appeal.

"It's as much as a man's life is worth, to come over your rascally hills," cried another. "How soon will it be dark, driver?"

"Inside an hour."

"And you're sure we ain't got no more downhill tumbles to make, after dark?"

"You never see'd a smoother bit o' road," answered the driver, a little miffed. "Ye mought spread a table-cloth, without a wrinkle, from here to Mink station."

"All right, old hoss," laughed the passenger. "Push on, then. I suppose you can hit the station in the dark?"

"Hit it? You bet! If you'd tie a roll of rag carpet round my eyes, and snuff out the moon, I'd engage to make it inside a cow's length."

They laughed, and drew back, as the stage rattled on, now dragging heavily through some drift, now running rapidly over a bit of road which the wind had swept clean.

But the passengers soon found that their coachman's idea of smoothness was slightly exaggerated. It was level only in comparison with the country they had already passed over, but was not without its long slopes, up which the coach heavily labored, or down which it swiftly rushed.

The sun sunk behind the distant hills. Evening slowly shadowed into night. Some stars faintly shone upon the sky, yet dimly lit with the last glimmer of the vanished day. There was still some five miles of the journey to make.

It grew still darker when they entered a sort of ravine, through which the road wound, and into which the shadows of a bordering fringe of low evergreens fell.

"What a spot for an ambuscade, if any of the road-agents were about," remarked one of the passengers, with a shudder.

"Yes," replied Will, indifferently. "But we have no treasure chest. They will hardly trouble us."

"Halt!"

It was a loud, stern voice from the side of the road that gave this startling cry. The coach was moving at a snail's pace through the heavy drift that half filled the ravine. The driver glanced nervously in the direction of the voice. There stood a shadowy figure darkly outlined upon the snow. The narrow black line pointing from his shoulder could be only the barrel of a rifle. Behind him, still further lost in the shadows, stood several other vague figures.

"Halt! or you're a dead man!"

There was no help for it. The horses were quickly drawn up. The coach came to rest.

Various emotions affected the travelers at this unlooked-for ambush. Some of them had considerable sums of money, and looked about nervously for some possible hiding-place. But before they could take any action of this kind the coach door was flung open, and a man appeared at the opening, pistol in hand.

"Come, gentlemen, hand over your funds, and quick as lightning," he cried. "The man that tries to draw a weapon I will shoot him as I would a dog. But if you pony up like white men ought, there won't no harm come to you."

Will slightly started. He had heard that voice very lately. He cast a keen glance at the man, but his face was hidden behind a dark mask.

"Stir up now. I have no time to waste. If you hang fire too long, I'm of the notion I'll have to make an example."

At this stern intimation one of the passengers hastily passed out his purse.

"Stir up, young chap. I'd like to see the color of your funds."

Will sat on the side of the stage next the robber. The pistol of the latter almost touched his face. The head of the road-agent was pushed forward as he glared into the faces of the passengers.

"My funds, eh?" said Will, carelessly.

"Yes, and quick as greased lightning."

Will was certainly quick enough. In an instant he had struck the fellow a quick blow on his outstretched wrist, so violent as to knock the pistol from his hand. Almost with the same movement he clutched him by the long hair and drew his head forward, while he pressed the cold muzzle of a revolver against his temple.

"There's my funds," cried Will. "And now, if you don't order your friends back there to drop their weapons, or make tracks, I'll leave their gang without a leader in the twinkling of an eye."

"Fire!" yelled the captured robber. "Fire, lads, if you shoot me in doing it!"

He made a violent effort to escape, but Will held him too fast.

"Fire!" cried Will, in his turn.

A fusillade of pistol-shots rattled from the coach. There was no answer from the robbers, who stood motionless as before.

"There's some trick there!" cried Will.

The coachman was of the same opinion. He jumped from his seat and ran up to the figures. "By the blue blazes, it's just as I thought," he exclaimed. "They're all dummies!"

"Then this is no dummy," returned Will, as he tore the mask from the face of the captured road-agent. "Ha! It's you, then? So, Neil Dempster, you came for your stake, eh? By all that's good, I've a notion that you will get it!"

CHAPTER VI.
JUDGE LYNCH'S COURT.

The coach drew up at Mink Station so suddenly that some of the passengers half fancied that it was another call from road-agents.

"Here we are," cried the coachman, springing to the ground, "and the train east due in half an hour."

Mink Station was certainly not a flourishing settlement. The plain board building which served as the railroad depot, a smaller erection which formed the home of the stage employees, and a stable for the horses, constituted the whole of that village in the wilds of Western America.

A half dozen men crowded out into the snowy gloom to witness the arrival of the stage.

"You're late, Jim," said one of these.

"Yes. A late start, heavy road, and extra freight."

"Extra, eh?" The speaker looked at the passengers descending from the stage. "Where is your extra?"

"You'll find him on top, with a bit of twine around his toes and fingers. We got waylaid by a road-agent, lads."

"The devil you did!"

"Just so. And if you've got a neat bit of cord ready it'll come in handy. You kin find the gentleman atop the stage."

There was considerable excitement at this announcement. In a few minutes more the well-bound highwayman was lifted down and dragged into the depot building, where a dozen stern eyes were bent upon him in the light of a swinging lamp.

There was a sullen, hopeless look upon the prisoner's face. He evidently saw no hope for him in the hard anger of those stern eyes.

"By Heaven! it isn't often that we catch one of these gentry," cried the station-master. "What's the verdict, boys? Shall we let him slip through our fingers?"

"Not much!" came the answer, in tones of harsh determination.

"How did it happen?"

In a few words the coachman told the story, while the passengers were warming themselves beside the huge stove in the center of the room.

During the conversation the bound prisoner lay on the floor, upon which they had roughly cast him, his face still sullen and defiant, though an expression of hopelessness showed through all his moroseness.

"The train is due in twenty minutes," remarked the station-master, looking at his watch. "I fancy that will be time enough, gentlemen, for us to give this fellow the benefit of the law. Everything must be done in order in these diggin's. There is no doubt whatever that he is an infernal villain. But it would be a rascally shame to hang the hound without giving him a fair trial. What say, lads, shall we organize a frontier court?"

"Ay! ay!"

In five minutes more a fully-organized Lynch law court was in session over the prisoner, and taking, in very concise manner, the evidence of those concerned in the affair.

We shall not trouble the reader with its details. There was an absurd parody of legal forms, but there was no lack of common sense, and of a rude intention to do justice, in the rough fellows constituting the court.

Nor was there the chance for a doubt concerning the guilt of the prisoner. The evidence against him was too direct and convincing for that.

Will's story, in particular, made a breeze of excitement in the room. The fellow then was a professional gambler. He had been caught in his own trap, and he had kicked against it. And he had undertaken highway robbery to get back his losses at cards.

This doubled his offense in the minds of the hearers. A professional, and yet not ready to stand a square show up from an opponent! That settled the business. A unanimous verdict of guilty came from the jury.

During this trial hardly a word had been spoken by the prisoner. Once or twice, indeed, he had given a sullen reply to some question, but he evidently felt himself to be doomed, and that no words of his could change his fate. He remained, therefore, morosely silent.

"To be hung by the neck till he is dead," repeated Judge Lynch. "And—what's the rest of the programme?"

"Instanter," cried one of the stablemen. "There's the stage hosses waitin' for their feed. But as long's I'm a member of this yere court I can't leave it till the bizness is put through."

"I suppose then, a man's life isn't of as much account as the grub for a set of stage-

horses!" remarked the prisoner, in a sullen accent.

"Now, see here, my friend," replied Judge Lynch impressively. "There's no use whatever of kickin' ag'in' it. You've got to be hung. That's a settled fact. And I can't see what the blazes difference it makes to you whether it's now, or next week. There's no use in you're being unreasonable. We've got other business to put through after this job's done."

A murmur of applause followed this speech. Evidently the court deemed the judge's argument unanswerable. But soon there was an awkward hitch in the proceedings. No rope fit for the purpose of sending a man out of the world could be found about the station. Of course, the stable might have turned up something satisfactory in that line, but where could he be hung?

Nature had made no provision for any such interesting ceremony in that locality. There was not a tree within ten miles of the station. As to hanging him to one of the beams of the station or of the stable, there was a strong demerit to any such idea. A superstitious fear of what might follow such a desecration crossed the fancies of the rough participants in the trial.

At this moment a long, shrill, distant sound came vibrating through the air, and striking upon the ears of the men gathered within the narrow room.

"There's the train whistle," cried the station-master, springing hastily up and seizing a lantern. "She'll be here inside of five minutes. This little ceremony must be left, gentlemen, until after the train passes."

"What's the use in waitin'?" replied the rough stableman. "He's got to peg out anyhow, and one way's 'bout as good as another. As long as there ain't no rope nor tree handy, s'pose we just lay him with his head on the track and let the engine do the work."

Will and his fellow-passengers had walked out onto the platform, and did not hear this cold-blooded proposition. It was at once carried, with very faint dissenting voices, and in despite of a piteous protest from the prisoner against such a fate.

"There's no use in gettin' in such a stew 'bout it," said the stableman coolly. "Your head wouldn't be no use to you if your neck was broken by a tumble from a tree. So what's the difference which way you peg out? Come, lads, let's stir up. Time's short."

Despite the gambler's struggles they carried him bodily out, and laid him, with his neck on the track, just in front of the short platform. He was too firmly bound to make a movement to escape from this horrible position.

None of the passengers were present, or they might have objected to this summary idea of an execution.

They had walked back through the snow toward the stable and were taking a general view of the surroundings of Mink Station by the light of the moon, which had lately risen.

"Where did that animal come from?" asked Will, pointing to a saddle horse which stood silently beside the coach.

The others looked critically at the horse.

"I shouldn't wonder if it belonged to the road-agent," remarked one of the others. "He didn't travel on foot, that's certain. Like enough his animal has followed the stage."

They were interrupted at this point by a second whistle from the approaching train, this time ten-fold more loud and shrill. The object of their observation was instantly forgotten. They hurried back to the platform, from which could now be seen the red head light of the approaching engine.

This sound had been startling to them, but it was terrible to the bound prisoner, waiting helplessly for his coming fate. He could feel the rail vibrate beneath his neck. The rush of the train rung with a tone of thunder in his ear. He sought to writhe away from the fatal iron of the track, but the yielding snow hindered his efforts. He could not escape the horrible death that threatened him, and all the agony of despair entered his soul. Yet he would make no cry, his enemies should not hear a sound from his lips. He nerved himself to die with the stoicism of an Indian chief.

Nearer and nearer came that terrible engine. The rush and roar increased until they seemed like thunder in his ear. A violent shudder passed through his frame; but not from the chill of the snow. He was too full of dread of death to feel the biting cold.

Would none of his murderers relent? He listened hopelessly for some sign of pity on their

part. Suddenly a well-known voice broke the silence.

"What have you done with the prisoner?" asked Will Wildfire. "He is not in the station."

"Him," answered the stableman. "Oh! we've put him in a safe spot. We don't want to bother you gentlemen, and we'll settle his hash arter you're gone on."

Will caught something in the tone of this answer that he did not like. He looked suspiciously around through the gloom as he spoke again:

"See here, friends, this business has got to be fair and square. The chap, no doubt, deserves hanging. But don't try any torturing game."

"What do you take us fer, young man?" was the rough and somewhat insolent reply. "We don't look like Injuns, I calculate. Here comes the train. Jest you git, and don't bother yer brains 'bout the matter."

The train, in fact, was thundering up to the station. But the trembling wretch, that lay there doomed to a horrible death, had caught a gleam of hope from Will's words. He cried out piteously:

"Oh, sir! They have laid me on the track! Hang me a dozen times, but save me from this!"

Will started, his eyes blazing with fury. He looked hastily around, and caught a glimpse of the dark figure of the gambler, showing dusklily through the gloom of the night. The engine was slowing up for the station, not twenty rods distant.

"Butchers!" cried Will, springing forward.

The rough stableman leaped into his way.

"You can't pass here, my young buck!" he affirmed.

"Can't I?"

And then there was a sight that opened all their eyes with surprise. Will seemed slight of figure in comparison with the burly fellow before him. Yet in an instant he had flung his arms around the great frame of the other, lifted him off his feet, and flung him six feet from him, the fellow falling with a shock that shook the whole platform.

There was not an instant to spare. As Will gave an alert leap to the ground in front of the platform the slowing engine came rushing and wheezing up. Will caught the bound gambler by the feet, just as the glaring head light of the engine passed the line of the station.

One quick pull—and in the same instant the heavy wheels of the locomotive passed with their crushing weight over the spot where a man's head had lain a moment before.

A cry of gratitude broke from the gambler.

"Saved!" he gasped.

"Yes, and by Jove, you have been punished enough!" exclaimed Will. "There shall be no such business as this when Will Wildfire is by to hinder it."

As he spoke he drew a knife from his pocket and quickly severed the prisoner's bonds.

"Make tracks now, while you can," he continued. "There stands your horse, beside the coach. And hark you, my friend, change your business for a better one."

"I'll not forget you, anyhow," exclaimed Neil, grasping Will's hand with a grateful grip. "I may find you in a tight place some day, and have a chance to pay you back for this."

He dashed away toward his horse, while Will returned to the platform.

"Is there any other gentleman here not satisfied?" he asked, looking sternly around.

Not a word came in reply. They remembered the fate of their companion, and were, besides, a little ashamed of their effort.

In five minutes afterward the train rolled away from the station, the sound of its wheels borne to the ears of a horseman, who was pushing at a gallop away through the night and the snow.

CHAPTER VII.

DR. TOD SLIGHTLY SURPRISED.

"I'm not right sure, but I've a strong notion that I've acted like a confounded fool," said Will Wildfire to himself, as the train of the Pacific railroad rolled rapidly eastward.

"I might have known that there was some game in that business of Dr. Tod's. He was always so rascally smooth-tongued, that I let him twist his lies around my brain, as if I had never seen the shape of a liar before. The fact is I'll never get over my hasty way of doing things. As for stopping to think, somehow it don't seem to be in my blood. I always act first and think afterward."

The train rolled on, over a prairie region, on which the genius of civilization had not yet laid its transfiguring hand. Endless miles of a level barren country, the home only of the buffalo

and the antelope, and of an occasional troop of wandering Indians, it is no wonder that Will was forced into his own mind for companionship.

"A child might have known that Robert Wetherly would not make for such a country as that," he continued to muse. "He is too fond of life, of business, and of the society of women. And he is an old enough hand at roguery to know that a man can hide better in the heart of a city than in a desert. If he isn't in Chicago at this minute, then I know nothing of human nature. It is a little like the old game of 'warm and cold.' I must have been getting a little too warm in the hunt, when he set Dr. Tod to coax me out of the way. If I can only be smart enough to keep out of sight now. They will think me well done for, and will be apt to show their hands more freely."

Will occupied himself during the next few hours in laying a plan of action by which he hoped to circumvent his foes, and to discover the hiding-place of the fugitive murderer upon whom he had sworn vengeance. Yet he was never got up by nature for a detective, and his well-laid scheme was one that it would not have taken a very shrewd rogue to see through. He was too direct and impulsive in disposition to ever make much of a figure as a layer of plots and plans.

Some conception of his weakness in this respect, induced him, soon after his arrival in Chicago, to seek the police authorities, and to lay before them the object of his visit to that city.

"Robert Wetherly? Robert Wetherly?" reflected the keen-looking officer to whom he addressed himself. "That name seems very familiar to me. Let me see. Is it not connected with some heavy job?"

"With a murder," answered Will. "He shot the woman to whom I was about to be married. Shot her at the altar. I have sworn to revenge her, and have been tracking him through the country for a whole year."

"Ah, yes! I have it now. At Philadelphia, was it not?"

"Yes," replied Will. "Descriptions of the murderer were sent over the whole country. But the villain is still at large."

"I had it in hand here," returned the officer. "I am satisfied he did not come to Chicago."

"Yet he is here now," affirmed Will.

A look of interest came into the face of the officer. His professional zeal was aroused. He questioned Will closely as to his reasons for thinking that the fugitive had taken refuge in that city.

"I was here two months ago!" answered Will. "I did not remain here long, however, for a fellow calling himself Doctor Tod forced himself upon my acquaintance. Whether he was really a doctor is questionable, but he had all the twang of the profession. Anyhow, he learned my business here, or perhaps knew of it beforehand. No doubt I was too open in my confidence, but the fellow well understood the art of pumping. At any rate, he gave me to understand that he knew my man well. He had seen him in a silver mine in the far West. The murderer was working there under an assumed name, but the description was exact, and he had once seen a letter drop from his pocket which was addressed to Robert Wetherly."

"Aha! That was the dodge, then?" broke in the officer.

"He took me in," continued Will. "I offered him a reward if he would lead me to this Golden Gulch mine, and put me face to face with Wetherly. The shrewd rogue held back for awhile. Business, and all that, was in the way. But he finally consented, after he had worked me up to fever heat."

"Precisely," ventured the officer. "And it was all a dodge, then? The object was to get you out of the way?"

"It was to put me out of the way," corrected Will. "He tried first to drug my coffee. He might have succeeded, only I turned the tables on him, and poured his poisoned coffee down his own throat. I then forced him to lead me to the mine. But, to avoid being found out in his knavery, he flung me from a mountain track down a precipice. Only good luck saved me from being mashed into atoms. As for the bound, he made tracks, thinking that I was safely done for."

The officer listened in silence, a look of deep reflection coming upon his face.

"Had Wetherly money when he left Philadelphia?"

"Very little, I fancy," replied Will. "I hardly think you need look for him among the nabobs of your city. You are more likely to

find him at the bottom than at the top of society."

"That is where you have been looking for him?"

"Yes. In all sorts of low-life places. I have been in the dens where such a fellow would be likely to hide, in every city in the community."

"And found no trace of your bird?"

"Not a feather."

"That is because you were working on an entirely false idea. You should have sought among the rich, not among the poor; at the top, not the bottom."

Will started, and looked eagerly at the speaker. Was it possible that he had wasted his year's search?

"But Wetherly certainly had very little money when he made his escape."

"He has more now," said the officer.

"How do you make that out?"

"Because your Dr. Tod is not the kind of man that works for nothing. He had no personal enmity against you, and men of his stamp do not engage to commit murder unless they are very well paid for it. Wetherly must have given him a large reward in hand, and a larger in the bush, for the job of putting you out of the way. And to do that he must be well provided with funds."

"By Jove, it sounds reasonable!" exclaimed Will.

"What follows? Men don't make a fortune out of an empty pocket, in a year's time, by ordinary business."

"No," answered Will doubtfully.

"Then this man must have been in some quick line of money-making."

"Burglary, perhaps," suggested Will.

"No. Not here at least. There has been no heavy job in the light-fingered business put through inside a year."

"What is it then?"

"Stocks," suggested the officer.

Will whistled with surprise.

"And Chicago's just the place for it," he cried. "I believe we've tracked the fox to his den. But who would have ever thought of looking for a murderer on the stock board?"

"Softly there," warned the officer. "You will hardly find him in the board. That would be too risky for a man who is wanted by the police. He is most likely in the background, and operating through a broker."

Will sat in silence for several minutes, while the officer looked quietly but intelligently at him.

"It is worth working out, at any rate," said Will, finally. "But how are we to set about it?"

"Every rogue has something of the spider about him," suggested the officer. "He is surrounded by a web, and can be reached if you can once strike a thread of the web. That is what we must seek to do in the present case. Find the web, and we may follow it up to the spider."

"Exactly," cried Will, "and the stock board is one thread of the web. That you can work. But where is the thread for me to work?"

"Doctor Tod," said the officer.

Will started. The whole plan of the officer shot through his brain like a flash. Doctor Tod must have returned to Chicago. He would fancy his victim dead. He would not be on his guard. Get on this man's track once, and it would very likely lead to Robert Wetherly at the other end.

"An excellent thought," said Will. "I will take it in hand."

Will walked away from the police office with some new ideas in his head. The shrewd and experienced officer had opened to him a long vista of possibilities for which he would never have thought of looking. It was evident that he had been controlled too much by one idea. He must widen his plans.

But where was Tod to be found? Will ran over in his mind his previous intercourse with him. He had known him for two weeks only before they left Chicago together, but in that time he had seen him in a number of places, and had accompanied him to several localities.

He thus knew something of Dr. Tod's haunts and associates, and was not without a clew upon which to work. But he must work cautiously. It was not advisable that the game should work the other way, and Tod discover him first.

Will's first efforts took the shape of a close watch upon the places in question, with the hope that he might find the worthy doctor entering or leaving some of them. For several days this surveillance was kept up without effect. The doctor had evidently dropped his old haunts, or was very careful in entering them.

But such a course of proceeding did not suit the Wildfire temper. It was Will's disposition to beard the lion in his den, and he was not one to long keep at this distant watching.

"I was never got up by nature for this business, that is sure," he growled, after standing on a cold corner for two hours, one evening. "For all I know, the fellow may be inside, and laughing at me. More goes for the dash, anyhow, let what will come of it."

It was a sort of tavern into which he entered, and one of no very high type. In fact, it was doubtful if the bar-room was not a screen for something of a less reputable character within.

He remembered that on his previous visit to this locality with Dr. Tod, they had penetrated beyond the bar, and he now walked boldly through to a private room beyond, merely remarking to the bartender as he passed:

"Bring me a hot punch; and red-hot, at that. I'm chilled clear through."

The room which he entered was a small apartment, very plainly furnished. A window opened on one side. On the other a door led to an adjoining room. This door stood slightly ajar, and behind it Will heard the sound of loud laughter, and of voices whose tones struck him as familiar.

The bartender brought the steaming punch, and placed it on the table before him. He then retired, with a curious look at the visitor.

Will left it untouched upon the table, while he continued to listen eagerly to the voices in the adjoining room.

"Sounds decidedly like Dr. Tod's voice," he said to himself. "It's a rich job if I've treed him already. If I can only get a view of the fellow now."

The slightly open door might offer an opportunity. Advancing carefully to the opening, Will took a cautious view of the room beyond, so far as the narrow crack would permit. He succeeded in seeing two persons, seated close together, and indulging in a very lively conversation.

One of them was a woman—a handsomely-dressed girl, whose profile only was visible to him. But this showed a full, well-rounded, beautiful face, with something voluptuous in its outlines. She was laughing at some remark of her companion, whose back was turned to Will.

But there was no mistaking that large figure, with its broad shoulders, and the short-cut, sandy hair. The cut of the brownish coat he wore was also familiar to Will. It was undoubtedly Dr. Tod.

The woman continued to laugh. "It's a pity that your talents have been wasted, doctor," she said, in a musical voice. "So the boy did not know that you was physicking him?"

"Not at first," was the dubious answer.

"Oh! he found you out, then, afterward?"

"Well, yes. It looked that way, anyhow."

Tod was silent.

"Come, come, Doc, that won't do," continued the woman. "I want the balance of that story. You've let half the cat out of the bag now. There's no use trying to hide the claws and the tail."

"Oh! it's of no account."

"Yes, it is. He turned the tables on you, then?"

"Well, rather."

"But how? It won't go no further, Doc. You can tell me the story safely."

"He smelt a rat one morning, that's all. I don't know if he saw me mixing his medicine; but, anyhow, he refused to take coffee that morning."

"And is that all?" in a tone of disappointment.

"Yes, That's all."

The woman looked at him suspiciously.

"What did he do with his coffee? He did not throw it out?"

"No."

"What then?"

"This!"

It was not Dr. Tod's voice that spoke this word. In fact, the worthy doctor found himself suddenly seized by the hair and his head bent forcibly back over the chair. He had just opened his mouth to speak when this sudden attack took place. The edge of a glass was set upon his lower lip and a steaming and scorching-hot beverage poured down his throat, burning like liquid fire as it went.

The woman screamed, and pushed back her chair. In an instant more the captive was released and the remainder of the glass of hot punch flung over his shoulders.

A quick step, and there was no one in the room but Tod and the woman.

He sprang to his feet, yelling with pain, and ran like a wild man to a pitcher of cold water that sat on a side table, with whose contents he deluged his scorched throat.

"Heaven preserve us!" he screamed. "It was like a voice from the dead! Who and what was that?"

"It was the boy!" answered his companion.

"It was Will Wildfire!"

"No, no!" came the shuddering answer.

"There is no Will Wildfire! He is dead!"

"It was his ghost, then!"

The two looked at each other with eyes that were dilated with superstitious fright.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE TRACK OF A FLITTING WOMAN.

WILL laughed to himself as he thought of the scene which he had just left. He was not quite easy in his mind however. One impulsive action had probably spoiled his whole plan of tracking the villainous doctor to his employer.

"But the confounded rogue," he growled to himself, "he set my blood boiling with his bragging story to that woman of how he had physicked me. I could not help teaching him a lesson. Hang him! I don't believe I have left an ounce of skin on his throat; and have scared him out of a year's growth into the bargain. Why, his hair was standing straight on end when I slid out of the room."

He made his way the next morning to the police station, anxious to know if any discovery had been made by the officer to whom he had given the case.

"We are feeling our way," said the worthy. "It is a delicate matter, you are aware, Mr. Wildfire. Haste often spoils the nicest laid schemes. I cannot say that anything has been discovered as yet, but we are narrowing the affair down. If I am right in my idea we will spot your man within a week."

"And if you are wrong?"

"That is quite a different affair. Then we will have to put ourselves on some other track. We may have to go through the whole scale before we hit on the correct note. But how is your search working? Have you caught sight of your game?"

"Yes," replied Will.

"Ah!" The officer grew suddenly interested.

"That's clever. How was it?"

Will was not any too anxious to tell the story. But he let it out to the officer's repeated questions.

"It was as comical a scene as you ever saw," he concluded, laughing. "Tod thought it was a veritable ghost. Poor devil! Ifancy he has enough hot punch to last him for a lifetime."

Will continued to laugh, but the officer only pursed his mouth and looked at him a little sourly. Evidently he was not in the humor to see the point of a joke.

"Yes, it was very amusing, no doubt," he said dryly. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. The worst of it is, though, that you have sold your game into the enemy's hands. And I think that your laugh was dearly bought."

"Oh no," broke in Will. "Tod is full of superstition. He will stick to the ghost story, you can bet on that."

"But Wetherly won't, when he comes to hear it," was the dry answer. "And the woman—"

He stopped suddenly. The mention of the woman seemed to have suggested a new thought to him. He remained for a minute lost in deep reflection, while Will sat looking inquiringly at him.

"I'll tell you what, my friend, it's a good thought. It may be worth following up," he remarked at length.

"What's a good thought?" asked Will, in surprise.

"The woman. Do you know anything about her? Is she a woman of the town?"

"I only know that she is intimate with Tod. I saw her in his company once before. I fancy that she is of easy virtue."

"And Wetherly is fond of female society, you say. Can we not put that and that together? This handsome light-of-love may be one of his associates."

"Shall we watch her, then?" asked Will.

"No," with a shake of the head.

"Why not?"

"Because if Tod sees Wetherly the ghost story is sure to come out. No matter if the doctor believes it a real ghost or not, the other is sure to be put on his guard. He will take care to keep clear of his old haunts."

"What are we to do with the woman then, if there is no use to watch her?"

"Buy her," replied the officer, shortly.

Will started. This was a new thought. He

began to grow a little ashamed of his dullness before this shrewd rogue-catcher.

"It is she who must put us on the trail of our game," continued the officer. "Depend upon it she knows the whole party, Tod, Wetherly, and all. You must win her over in some way. Make love to her, feast her, fee her. Don't let money stand in the way. But above all, keep your eyes open. She may be treacherous. Don't take a step in the matter without consulting with me. And, mark you, wiser men than you have been led away by women. Take care that the charms of this handsome creature do not shut your eyes to your real object."

"There is no fear of that," replied Will, his eyes growing stern and cold as the thought of his murdered love arose in his mind. "There is no danger that I will forget her whom I loved with my whole soul, and whom I have sworn to revenge, if I have to give my life to the task."

"Lose no time," warned the officer. "She may receive a hint to change her lodgings. Make haste to get your word in her ear before the other party can act."

Will acted with little loss of time on this advice, though he did not fear but that he would have plentiful time to carry out the suggestion of the detective. He did not imagine that the consequences of his imprudent action would display themselves for several days, at least.

He only delayed, however, to shave and to take dinner before betaking himself to the scene of his previous night's adventure.

The same bartender stood behind the bar, and fixed his eyes with a peculiar look upon Will as he entered. Will was quick to notice this look, but he walked across the room with his usual careless manner, and entered into conversation with the man.

"Such a scorchin' as he got," said the bartender, after some words had passed. "Why he a'most swallered a pitcher of ice water. And he swore hard enough to knock down a stone wall. He thought, at first, it was an imp of the devil, who had poured liquid fire down his throat."

The fellow laughed heartily at the recollection.

"He thought I was a ghost, then?"

"Why blame him it war as much as we could do to make him swaller anything else. Had to show him the empty glass of punch. But what the blazes did you scorch the chap for?"

"Only to pay him back for a trick he played on me."

"Oh! I see!" The bartender winked in admiration of Will's practical joke.

"But that ain't the whole of the job," he continued. "You've skeered the gal clean out of the house. She emigrated this mornin', bag and baggage. She were only a boarder, though. She weren't a bad one, so fur as I know."

Will's face fell. Here was a volunteered statement which decidedly interfered with his plans. Quick as he had been he was too late. The bird had flown.

"Is that really the case?" he asked, in a tone of disappointment. "You're joking now, my good fellow."

"Nary a joke," was the reply. "You can go through the concern, if you want, and see if she's left a rag behind. Why, ropes wouldn't have held her, she was so bent on going."

Will drummed with his fingers on the bar. He was in a quandary. There was no doubt that the man was telling the truth.

"Suppose you mix me up that hot punch again," he at length remarked. "Somehow another fellow got the good of the one you made me last night."

The bartender laughed loudly, as he proceeded, in a skillful manner, to compound the drink called for.

"And—what did you say her name was?" asked Will, as he sipped the steaming beverage.

"Sue, we call her. Sue Dempster."

Dempster? That was the name of the gambler and road-agent. Will took another sip of the hot punch.

"And where has she gone?"

"You've got me there, now. Why I know no more than the man in the moon. That kind don't keep a directory of their goings. Foller some of her friends, if you're anxious to find her out. She hasn't posted us, that you can bet on."

Will was completely at sea. After leaving the bar-room he walked irresolutely down the street, trying to devise some plan for his further movements. A dozen schemes came into his head, only to be thrown away as useless. He could think of but two plans of action. One was to be on the look-out again for Dr. Tod, by

following whom he would probably be able to discover the retreat of the woman. The other was to make a round of all the sporting places in the city, with the hope that Wetherly's fondness for sport might lead him to some of these localities.

"Though I don't fancy that there will be much use in that," he considered. "If they are on their guard, as I suppose they are, judging from this girl's movement, I shall have trouble to find them."

Remembering the detective's desire to be acquainted with every step of his search, he repaired to the police office, and acquainted him with what had happened.

"Sue Dempster, eh? But then she may have as many names as ribbons. An exact description of her appearance will be better. If she is in Chicago I will find her for you."

It began to look as if she was not in Chicago, after a week had passed during which all the efforts of the police failed to find a person answering to the description. She was, besides, well-known to some members of the force. But she was certainly not in any of the usual haunts of the frail sisterhood. The officer scratched his head in an annoyed manner as he was obliged to confess to Will that the girl had baffled the whole force.

Another week passed by with the same result. But Will was not one to remain easy. He was of too restless a temperament for that. He spent the time now in making that round of sporting places which he had projected, and in some of which there was a bare possibility that he might discover Robert Wetherly.

It was at a late hour of a keen January night. He had stepped into a variety theater with the bare hope that he might discover some of the parties he was seeking, among its mixed audience.

There was no trace, however, and he left the place again, after listening to a stupid song, and the stale jokes of a black-faced banjoist.

On his way back to his hotel the sound of music struck his ears. It came from a building which he was passing, the second floor of which was brilliantly lighted, while laughter, and the tread of dancing feet, came to his ears.

"What is going on inside?" he asked of a man who stood at the open door.

"Only a dance," was the reply. "It is the ball of the Harmony Club."

"Ah! High-toned?"

"Not excruciatingly," was the man's laughing response. "It isn't made up of our first families."

Will hesitated a moment. He had tried all sorts of places; why not the ball-room? It could not be a very reputable assemblage. Might not the woman he sought be among the dancers?

Purchasing a ticket Will mounted to the dancing floor. It was a lively scene which revealed itself to his eyes. The room was crowded, the dancers thronging so thickly upon its floor that they hardly had room for the evolutions of the cotillion, which the musicians were playing.

Flashing eyes, flushed faces, laughing lips, whirled and wreathed before him, as their nimble feet went through the set figures of the dance, while the floor vibrated with a springy motion, and a thin cloud of dust floated through the air of the room, faintly dimming the brilliant lights.

A number of others, of the "wall flower" fraternity, were seated around the sides of the large room, looking wistfully upon the enjoyment which they had not the opportunity to share.

Will had watched this scene with interested eye for some minutes, when the music stopped, and in a moment the regular lines of dancers broke up into a brilliant confusion of rich colors and mingled forms, while the quick flutter of fans, and the tones of laughter and conversation, replaced the steady fall of dancing feet.

He walked through the close-mingled throng, observing every face as he passed, with the forlorn hope that the person he sought might be among them. Many a curious look was cast at him in return. It was not only his graceful figure and handsome face that attracted these observant eyes, but also a sense that he was not of their kind that he was a stray sheep from a higher fold.

The music struck up again. It was a waltz tune now that struck upon his quick ear. He felt the blood stir within his veins at the sound. He was young, active and fond of the dance. Why should he not take part with some of these fine-looking women, with whom he need

not be at special ceremony in seeking a partner?

Couples were already taking their places for the dance. Will stood looking irresolutely around at the different faces, trying to decide on whom he should approach with a request to accept him for a partner.

As he stood thus somewhat apart from the mass, he felt a light touch upon his shoulder, and heard a musical voice at his ear, speaking with a laughing accent:

"The music is sounding, the waltzers are whirling. Is it a partner you seek, fair sir?"

"Yes," answered Will, quickly. "And you—"

"If you will."

He saw only a graceful form and the sheen of a silken dress. He heard only the tones of a rich voice. How, he hardly knew, but in a moment more his arm was around a woman's slender waist, his hand in a woman's hand, and he was wheeling around the floor in the delirious circles of the waltz.

It was all done so quickly that he had caught but a hasty glimpse of a beautiful face so close as almost to touch his own. But now a strange, gasping sound of surprise came from her lips.

Will looked at her more closely. What was his surprise to see the blooming visage of the woman he had so long sought in vain, the warm face of Sue Dempster?

Her eyes were fixed upon him with a strangely fascinating glance. And the music still throbbed. And still they whirled through the giddy waltz. But what strange thoughts passed through those two minds, so near, and yet so far asunder.

CHAPTER IX.

A TALK OVER AN ICE.

It was a strange situation in which Will Wildfire found himself. Baffled, as he had been, in his search for this woman, who seemed to have so suddenly vanished from human sight, yet here he was, by a remarkable chance, with her hand in his, his arm around her waist, her warm breath upon his face, whirling through the bewildering circles of the dance, to the sound of ringing music, and in the midst of a close medley of human forms.

The thought ran through his mind: "I have her now. She shall not easily escape." Just what thoughts occupied her brain it would not have been so easy to tell, though he saw in her eyes something of the look of the bird that is suddenly caged, and that is wistful of some means of escape.

This look lasted but for a minute, however, and was replaced by a reckless expression. A light laugh came from her lips, she pressed the hand that held hers, while her eyes were fixed upon Will with a strange glance, whose meaning he could not divine.

She danced well, that was evident. Will, too, was an excellent waltzer, and the handsome couple attracted considerable attention as they circled through the confused throng with a grace and ease which few dancers possess.

The waltz grew wilder and wilder as they went on. The music quickened its time, and the whirling mass was twined round and round the room with a mad abandon which the witches of the Brocken might have envied.

And now, with one grand crash of sound, the music ceased. Will's cheeks were warm with the breath of the woman who had clung closer and closer to him in the wild medley of the dance. His pulse throbbed, and the blood ran in hot torrents through his veins. If it had been her purpose to catch him in the snare of her beauty she had almost succeeded, for he was young, warm-hearted and susceptible to female charms.

They walked through the swarming throng, her cheeks flushed, her eyes scintillating with lustrous light. She bent their dangerous gleam yet upon her youthful companion.

They walked on and on, engaged in light and laughing conversation, she leaning restfully upon his arm.

"You are warm. Will you not take an ice?" he asked.

"With pleasure."

A minute or two more found them seated in an adjunct to the ball-room, beside a table on which were not only ices, but two brimming goblets of some of those mysterious mixtures in which the strong spirit of wine is so deftly hidden.

"You knew me, then, at sight?" he asked, as they tasted the ices.

"Why, no," she laughed. "I saw a poor, unlucky, good-looking fellow wandering like an

orphan in search of a partner, and I could not help taking pity on him. I never dreamed of finding the gay Will Wildfire in that stray ball-room wanderer."

"It was a mutual surprise, then," rejoined Will. "But you are not alone here? Where is your friend, the doctor?"

She looked at him with laughing eyes over the goblet, which she had just raised to her lips.

"You rogue!" she cried. "Why, between the punch and the fright you almost did for the poor fellow. Such an object as he was!"

"It will teach him a lesson," rejoined Will, echoing her laugh. "It is never safe to brag until you are sure of your company."

"Then he did physic you?"

"Did he? I fancy so. And that was not all.—But did he tell you the rest of the story?"

"Not he. You cut him short in the midst. What was it?"

"Never mind, so long as you do not know it. I had best not reveal the doctor's secrets. But come, you are warm yet, and you are not eating your ice."

"It is too cold," she replied, pushing it away with a pretty grimace. "It chills one to the heart. I like this better."

She raised the goblet again to her lips.

"Then have it filled again. It is a cold night out. You want something to protect you against it."

"Very well. If you insist on it."

"Fill our glasses again," Will ordered of the waiter. "And take away these ices."

"Shall I not see you home?" he asked. "You will need a carriage on a night like this."

"I have walked on many a worse one," she coldly replied. "And the ball is not over yet. I am too fond of dancing to desert the music."

"But suppose I stay till the end?"

"I have an escort," she rejoined. "I hope you do not think I came alone."

"Excuse me," Will confusedly answered. "I did not mean—"

"Of course you didn't," she laughed, looking into his eyes. "If I was in want of company I don't know any one I would rather choose than my handsome partner in the waltz. But I am not, you see."

She continued to laugh, as she took a deep draught from her re-filled glass.

Will looked at her inquiringly.

"What has become of Dr. Todd?" he asked.

"Heaven knows. He is pouring balm-of-Gilead down his throat, I suppose. I know little and care less, about him."

"You fitted, at short notice, from your former residence."

She started, and cast a hasty glance at him.

"You know that?"

"Why, of course I do," pressing her hand. "I was not willing to lose sight of the beautiful Sue Dempster without a second call upon her. Will you not tell me where you live now? As I cannot escort you home, I should be glad of an opportunity to see you again."

"Thank you kindly, Mr. Wildfire, but I am not at home to company. One does not keep up a ball-room acquaintance, you know. That is not etiquette."

"But I am more than a ball-room acquaintance."

"No matter. I don't want you, and I won't have you. You can dance with me again, if you will. But that is the end of it. It will be good-by then, my charming fellow."

Her eyes danced with a roguish light. She laughed at Will's dismal expression, and drew up the corners of his mouth with her tapering fingers.

"There. That's better. Why you look as blue as indigo. One would think you were badly stricken with me, but I happen to know what it is all worth. Come, the music is wasting there. Let us back to the ball-room. Why, they have all gone, and left us dismally alone here."

"But will you not tell me where you live?"

"No, I will not," with a willful pout.

"I have money, Sue. Plenty of it. Your nest may not be well furnished."

She looked reflectively at him; resting her finger on her dimpled chin.

"It suits me," she said.

"And your friend, Robert Wetherly?"

She had lifted her glass again, to finish its contents. It slipped from her fingers, and fell with a crash of broken crystal to the table. The liquor flowed in little rivulets away, while she sat with wide open eyes, fixing them in a strange look upon his face.

"I do not know what you mean," she said.

"I fancy you do, then. But you have spilled your drink. Will you not have a fresh glass?"

"No," with a slight shudder. "Robert Wetherly? I have heard that name somewhere. But who is he? Why do you name him to me?"

"You know too well."

"I swear to you that I don't."

"Then he is sailing under false colors. Picture to yourself a tall, rather stoutish person, with full face and light complexion. Gray eyes, slightly contracted. A somewhat wide mouth with thin lips. Hair and whiskers a light brown. Fond of dress and jewelry. Probably wears a diamond pin."

Will watched her closely as he spoke. There was at first a wavering look in her eyes. But this passed, and was succeeded by a defiant expression.

"I don't know the man," she said shortly.

"Could I not offer an inducement to aid your memory?"

"I don't know him, I say," defiantly. "Is not that enough for you?" She had risen to her feet, and stood with one hand resting on the table between them.

"But a truce to all this," she cried excitedly.

"There is the music calling us, and we wasting our time here. Come to the festive hall; come, come, come." She sung these last words, as she waltzed from the room, casting a glance of gay defiance upon Will at every turn of her graceful form. In a moment more she had disappeared, leaving him alone and disappointed.

Will sat for a few minutes toying with his glass. He felt completely baffled. He had not dreamed that the girl would repel his advances, yet she had simply laughed at him for his pains. He hardly knew what course to take next. Straying into the bar-room he obtained a cigar, and stood smoking, with his back to the bar, a gloomy look upon his face. Should he follow the girl home? It was worth trying, but she would doubtless be on her guard against any such effort.

While he stood in this morose mood a group of three young men came into the room, and called rather loudly for drinks, as they bustled up to the bar.

"So you lost your partner," said one of these, laughingly.

"Why, you didn't fancy that I was going to dance with her every set? That's not my style. And what's more, Sue Dempster is one of those free goers whom it don't do to draw the reins on too tight. What will you drink, lads?"

Will looked around with interest. The speaker was a young man, with a good face, though it bore marks of dissipation.

"Well, it's no matter I suppose," said the other, teasingly. "I'll say this for Sue, that she knows how to pick out a pretty face and well-trained feet. Why, the fellow was a charm of a dancer."

"Oh, hang the fellow!" cried the other testily. "Empty your glasses, boys, and let us get back to the ball-room."

Will looked more curiously at him. The young fellow was about his own height, and not unlike him in features. He was dressed in a short sack coat, of a brown color. His mustache was much like that of Will's in shape and color, but he wore his hair tumbled loosely over his forehead. All these particulars Will took in at a glance.

As the young man was leaving the room with his companions, he felt a light tap on his shoulder. He turned, and gave a surprised look, on seeing who it was that had stopped him.

"Can I have a few minutes' talk with you?" asked Will.

"I have no objections."

"Try a cigar, then. Let us take a stroll outside, I want to escape from the close rooms."

With a look of curiosity the young fellow lit a cigar and followed Will to the stairs that led to the street. Not a word passed until they stood in the hall below.

"Is not this far enough?" he asked. "It is rather too chilly outside."

"As you please. You escorted Sue Dempster to the ball?"

"Certainly."

"At what hour do you expect to take her home?"

"In about an hour from now."

"Very well. I want to take your place, and go home with her."

The young fellow started with surprise.

"It will take two to that bargain," he replied. "Sue has a will of her own. And she's not one of that kind."

"But suppose you and I were to change hats and overcoats, and change places in the dark hall, might she not mistake one for the other?" He tossed his hair as he spoke, and brought it

down over his forehead in the fashion of his companion.

The latter looked at him curiously, and laughed.

"A fine trick that," he said. "But, bless us, wouldn't I have to insure my hair the next time I met the girl. I don't know what you are after, my friend, but you will have to bark up another tree. I don't take."

He turned on his heel, as if to return.

"One minute," remarked Will. "This is no trifling scheme of mine. There is more in it than you imagine."

In a few words he gave the youth a slight idea of his object.

"I mean no harm to the girl, but I do have an iron in the fire for this friend of hers. See here, my dear sir, if you will keep quiet about what I have just told you, and help me in this little trick, it will be worth your while." He slipped a bank note into the youth's hand. "This is in earnest of good intentions. You will find twice as much in the pocket of my overcoat."

The young fellow looked at the denomination of the bill by the dim light that burned in the hall. He stood a moment in reflection.

"I will do it," he announced.

At the close of every dance some of the dancers were now leaving the saloon. Will did not return to it, but stood in the hall below, waiting impatiently until his hour's probation should end. He thought that, by his keeping out of sight, the girl would be thrown off her guard, and would not be distrustful of pursuit.

The hour passed and a considerable throng of dancers descended. Will withdrew into the background as he saw among them Sue Dempster and her young escort.

The young fellow went back to the coat-rack, and returned in a few minutes attired for the street. The girl was closely wrapped up, and wore a close veil to protect her from the nipping January air.

Her companion looked furtively around him. He had not forgotten his compact. He caught a gesture from Will, who stood in a dark corner of the hall.

"Excuse me for one moment, Sue," he said, hastily. "I forgot something."

He disappeared, leaving her impatiently awaiting his return. In a minute more he reappeared, or at least, a person closely resembling him in dress and general appearance.

"All right," he remarked. "Let us be off now. It is a cold night outside."

There was a muffled sound in his voice. Sue looked quickly at him.

"What ails you, Harry? Are you catching cold?"

"A touch of it, I fancy."

Few words more passed on the way home. She seemed disposed to be silent, for which her companion was very thankful. A long ride in a street car brought them to a neat residence on the outer limits of the city.

"I am glad to get home, for I am half chilled through," she said, shiveringly.

"And I, too," replied her companion. "Have you a fire within? I would like to get warmed up before returning."

They stood under the light of a street lamp. She cast an odd glance at him on hearing this remark. Evidently she noticed something strange in its tone, or its substance. She said nothing, however, but quietly opened the door of the house before which they stood.

"So you would like a chance to get warmed up?" she asked, turning to him.

"Yes."

"Very well, then, my dear Will Wildfire; you may find a stove at the nearest hotel. You're a shrewd trickster, my charming friend, but you have tried your ammunition on the wrong game this time. Good-night, and pleasant dreams."

She slammed the door in his face, leaving him cold, baffled and angry, alone in the January night.

CHAPTER X.

WILL MAKES A DISCOVERY.

It is awkward to be baffled at the moment when success seems assured. Will Wildfire sought the nearest hotel, after advising the policeman on that beat to keep an eye on the movements of the inmates of the house whose door had been so rudely slammed in his face.

He was at once chilled with the cold, and hot with anger, and yet he could not help laughing to think how neatly he had been fooled by the cunning Sue Dempster.

"But I'll be even with her yet," he said to himself. "She's a shrewd jade, but hang me if I am going to cry quits with the woman so easily as that."

She has had her play at the balls. It is my turn next."

He went to bed with the fancy that he had not been definite enough in his offer of a bribe. He should have named some fixed amount, large enough to dazzle her eyes.

"The girl must be poor," he thought, "or she would never have lived where I first found her. If she is not for sale to the highest bidder, then I know nothing of human nature."

He went to sleep to dream that he was at last on the track of his foe, and a dark look of revengeful anger came upon his face, even in slumber, as his mortal enemy came within reach of his dreaming fancy.

The next day broke with a drizzling rain to replace the winter sunshine of the day before.

At ten o'clock that morning Sue Dempster sat in the neatly-furnished parlor of the house in which she had vanished from Will's sight the night before.

She held in her hand a slip of paper, over whose contents she seemed to be seriously musing. It was but a narrow fragment of writing paper, with a few lines traced upon it, yet it seemed of the deepest interest to her mind.

"Ten thousand dollars!" she repeated to herself. "And I have seen the time when I would have sold myself, body and soul, for as many cents!—And he is a handsome fellow, too. I'm half in love with Will Wildfire.—But then—"

She relapsed into silence, as her musing fit returned.

"Oh, nonsense!" she suddenly ejaculated. "There is no use for me to let such fancies come into my head. The man thinks, no doubt, that his money will move the world. It may, perhaps, but it will not move me. There are other things of value in this world besides money, and love is one of them. Yes, love! Degraded and wretched woman as I have been, I am yet capable of love, and of letting no obstacle stand in the way of my love. Beware, Will Wildfire! you fancy you have a child in your hands; beware lest you feel the claws of the tigress under the silken touch of her whom you seek to purchase."

Suddenly rising, with an angry gesture, she tore the paper into a hundred fragments, which she cast from the window into the street.

"To the winds with your base offer," she fiercely exclaimed. "You shall do no harm to him I love! No, not if I become a demon myself, and kill you to save my Robert." There was a strange mingling of softness and ferocity in the tone with which she spoke these words. It resembled the tiger's touch of which she had spoken, the claws hidden under the velvet.

"He has his guards upon this house, I doubt not. But what matters that to me? I shall go out unseen, despite their utmost vigilance."

There was no boast in what she said. A half-hour afterward a veiled and hooded figure left the door of a house at some distance in the same row from that inhabited by Sue Dempster. She was wrapped in a waterproof cloak, and so enveloped that it would have been difficult to guess what sort of figure lay within those wraps.

She passed by a plainly-dressed man who lounged in a doorway of the opposite side of the street. He looked at her carelessly, and continued to whistle in a low tone, as he kicked his feet to keep them warm.

Less than fifteen minutes afterward Will Wildfire passed.

"What luck?" he asked, stopping opposite this man.

"Not a mouse stirring," came the answer. "They all seem dead. Don't fear that a soul will get out of the house without passing under my eyes or those of my partners."

"All right," returned Will. "I depend upon you." He walked on through the rain, feeling that all was going well, and that he had the girl under his finger.

"I wonder how my offer is working upon her mind," he said to himself as he walked on. "I fancy that it will have its influence."

If he had known what that influence was, that the white fragments of paper under his feet were portions of his fruitless offer, and that the girl he had sought to purchase was at that moment seeking his enemy, having escaped the vigilance of his guards, he might not have felt so well satisfied.

But Will dreamed nothing of all this, and walked on in happy unconsciousness of what had occurred.

Two o'clock that afternoon was the hour he had named in his note, at which he would call for an answer to his offer. At two o'clock precisely he presented himself at the door of the house.

The men whom he had on the watch had assured him that everything remained right, and that no one but a colored servant had appeared.

Will was slightly surprised, then, when this servant answered his ring, and in reply to his wish to see Miss Dempster, informed him that she was not in.

"Not in?" he repeated incredulously. "But she has engaged to see me at this hour. You must be mistaken."

"She's out, I tell you," replied the servant, insolently.

"Very well then. I shall wait until she returns. Please show me into the parlor. I know she will be here soon."

The girl rather reluctantly obeyed. She was somewhat dubious about the safety of the articles of furniture. But she armed to herself that she could keep an eye on the door, and if this fellow should turn out to be a burglar in disguise he could not well carry out any of the chairs or tables under his coat.

Will nonchalantly hung his overcoat and hat in the

hall and walked into the parlor. He felt sure that this "not at home" was a mere blind, and he was prepared to stay until it worked itself out, if he had to hold the fort for a week to come.

"There is some confounded game behind it all," he thought. "Perhaps she does not bite at my offer, and holds off to sell herself more dearly. Very well, she must be mine, if I have to double the amount. I would spend my whole fortune to bring that murdering wretch under my hand."

He walked the floor with the impatience of a caged lion. The very thought of his foe had stirred him into a fierce nervous excitement.

A half hour passed, with no sign of her for whom he waited. Will began to grow irritably vexed. His disposition was not one to let him rest long in suspense.

"By all that's good, I'll search the house for her if she does not show herself soon!" he ejaculated. "The girl is making a fool of me, and hang me if I like that sort of play. As for her being out of the house, it is simply an impossibility."

Yet, despite his sureness, she was at that moment entering the house further down the row from which she had emerged several hours before. This house she passed through, with a mere greeting to the servant, and entered a narrow alley which ran in the rear of the row. In a minute more she had entered the yard gate of her own residence, unseen by the vigilant watch which Will had set upon the house.

Meanwhile his impatience had become aroused to fever pitch.

"Hang it all, is there nobody lives in the house?" he exclaimed. "I hope that black girl don't run the whole establishment. By Jupiter, I am not going to stay here longer, like a blind fool! She is somewhere in the house, and I am bound to find her."

The servant was at that moment engaged in the kitchen, and failed to see the guest hastily leave the parlor, and proceed up-stairs with a quick and heavy step. At the head of the stairs a door stood open, leading into a sitting-room, with a bay window at the back. The room was empty, however, and Will turned and followed the short entry to another door that led to a front apartment.

This door stood slightly ajar. He knocked at it, twice successively. No answer came. He pushed it open, and looked into the room.

It was a bedroom into which he had thus intruded. It was prettily furnished in blue, and had about it a certain air of neatness and refinement that made him pause involuntarily upon the threshold.

"It must be her room," he said to himself. "It looks like her. Despite her reckless ways there is something of this same grace and refinement about Sue Dempster. But there is nobody here. Where in the world can the woman be in hiding?"

He was about to withdraw, when something caught his eye at the other side of the room that brought a red flush of excitement to his cheek. He strode hastily across the apartment to a small portrait picture that hung upon the opposite wall. His eyes blazed with fury on observing it more nearly.

"So!" he cried with deep rage. "You do not know him then? You have never heard the name of Robert Wetherly? And yet you keep his portrait hanging as the choice object in your bedroom? I have unearthed you now, Sue Dempster. And him too!"

Lifting his clenched hand he dealt the pretty framed picture a blow that shattered at once glass and frame, and rent in two the smiling presentment of his mortal foe.

A sharp gasping cry from behind him followed this act of violence. He heard the flight of a rapid step, and felt himself seized by the arm and dragged forcibly away from the spot.

Will hastily turned. Before him stood Sue Dempster, her tearful face distorted with anger, her hands violently clutching his shoulder.

"How dare you?" she cried. "How dare you enter my room and lay your hands on what belongs to me? Leave here instantly, sir! Leave this house! You know not whom you trifle with when you try such acts of violence upon my property!"

Will looked at her in surprise.

"The truth is out, at all events," he coolly remarked. "You did not know Robert Wetherly, yet you have his portrait hanging upon your wall. The murderer! he has my blood now upon his hands." He looked at his bleeding fingers, which had been cut by the broken glass. "But it shall be my turn next. I swear it!"

She loosed her grasp upon his shoulder as she looked at him with a strange expression, in which anger and fear seemed mingled with some darker feeling.

Then she fell upon a chair beside her and broke out into a somewhat forced laugh.

"You startled me, Will," she cried, still laughing. "It is not that I care so much for the picture. But I was angry, I confess. No matter, let us cry quits. I have kept you waiting, and you get tired."

"Exactly," answered Will. "An appointment at two does not usually mean three. Where have you been?"

"Sleeping, if I must confess it. The stupid girl did not understand that I was to be awakened. But your hand is cut and bleeding. Let me wrap up your poor hurt fingers."

There was something soft and tender in her tone Will yielded to the witchery of those soft accents and to the delicate touch of her fingers, as she deftly bound up his wounds, with a series of pressure which he would not have deemed possible five minutes before.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "There is glass in that cut. Poor fellow! I must have hurt you dreadfully. Let me see it."

She washed the blood off again and skillfully extracted the splinter of glass, leaning so close over him in the operation that her warm breath blew away the clustering hair from his brow.

"You rogue!" she exclaimed, as she continued to dress his wounds. "To play the trick on me which you did last night!"

"I fancy you gave me a Roland for my Oliver," he laughingly replied. "And besides—you did not know Robert Wetherly."

"Not under that name," she answered. "But I confess, you have found me out. There, now you are all right. Let this help to cure your wounds." She pressed her lips to the hurt fingers.

"You got my note?"

"Yes. But come, this is hardly the place to receive company."

She led the way to the sitting room, the smiling expression of her face changing as soon as it was turned away from him.

"Understand me," he said, after some moments' conversation. "I am not seeking to buy love, but revenge. I would not have the love that can be bought."

"And I have none for sale," she coolly replied. "It is ten thousand dollars then, for putting you on the track of this man?"

"Yes. This man who goes under the false name of—"

"That is part of the bargain," was her answer. "I demand the money before I will take a step further."

"And you will give him no hint of my purpose in the mean time?"

"To prove my honesty I will leave the city, for a place where I cannot come in contact with him. I must do so in any case, for I fear his revenge if I should fail. And I wish you to accompany me, so that you can be sure that I am true to my engagement."

"But that will not be necessary. I trust your word," said Will.

"Then you will not come with me?" she asked, casting upon him one of her seductive glances. "I want you, not alone as escort. I want to show you the beautiful home I have out on the Illinois. Will you not come with me, Will?"

He looked into her mellow eyes, full of a softness which she knew so well how to give them.

"Yes; I will come," he said.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT CAME OF A RAILROAD TRIP.

At ten o'clock on the succeeding morning Will Wildfire was closeted with the detective officer whom he had engaged to work up his case.

"You have beaten us hollow," said the latter, after listening with great interest to Will's account of his adventures. "You are sure it was the portrait of your enemy that you discovered? You could not be mistaken?"

"No," answered Will, shortly, as he looked at his bandaged fingers.

"And she wishes you to go with her from the city?"

"Yes. She seems to be afraid to stay here, after revealing this man's hiding-place."

"He could not injure her after we once got our hands upon him."

"I don't know that. She may understand him better than we do. He knows how to strike with an unseen hand. Look at my experience with Dr. Tod."

"Very true," muttered the officer.

"She refuses to reveal the secret until she is far away from the city. For that reason it will be necessary for me to accompany her."

"I see. It may be necessary."

"And besides," continued Will, "if he has a watch set on me, it may throw him off his guard to find that I have left the city. I can telegraph to you if I should learn anything."

The officer sat looking at him with an odd glance. In his heart he was wondering how much share the charms of the woman had in this resolution. She had a reputation for her fascinating powers. Was this a new bird charmed by the gilded serpent?

The conversation continued for some time longer, the details of the whole affair being passed under discussion.

"My presence here will not be necessary," remarked Will. "I fancy you and your companions understand pretty thoroughly the art of rogue-catching."

"We have had some experience," replied the officer. "I have one thing further to say to you, Mr. Wildfire. I fear you are of too trusting a nature. You remember the last time you left Chicago, in company with Dr. Tod, and what came of it. You are leaving here now in company with a person who may also be an agent of your enemy. Beware of her! Some new scheme of murder may lay beneath all this womanly softness."

"What! from Sue Dempster? You don't know her, that is evident."

"A woman touched in her love is like a tigress robbed of her young. Beware of her. This journey may be all a plan to carry out some deep-laid scheme."

"Very well," said Will, with an incredulous laugh. "I shall be on guard. And I may have to look out in another quarter. The girl may be intending an assault upon my heart, instead of upon my life!"

"Which may be more fatal than the other," rejoined the officer, with a critical look at his young and ingenuous countenance. "I hardly believe that you are strongly guarded in that quarter."

"Trust me," replied Will, laughing. "I am not the unfledged bird you may imagine."

He went from the office and down the stairs of the

building, still laughing, while the officer followed him with his keen, calculating eye.

He sat in deep meditation for several minutes after Will had gone.

"I hardly know what to make of all this," he said to himself. "The girl may be honest in her intentions. One would think that the bribe he offers would buy all of her kind in Chicago. And yet there are some things in this world stronger than money. I am afraid that some treachery lies behind this neat scheme of hers. But what can one do? It must be tried. The boy will have to be on his guard. And it is just as well now, since he has found out all that he can, to have him out of our way for a while. We may do better without him."

He continued to muse, drawing some figures carelessly on a sheet of paper before him, after a fashion of his when he was in deep thought.

Meanwhile Will was making his way to his lodgings, to finish his preparations for the projected journey.

It was a beautiful morning in mid January that Will Wildfire and Sue Dempster entered the cars of a train ready to start on its swift flight southward through Illinois.

They had met at the depot, a precaution which seemed to Will sufficient to throw his enemy off his guard. The young man, in fact, was by no means well calculated to compete with rogues, his direct, honest disposition leading him often into dangers which a more suspicious nature would have avoided.

In this case, however, there was no evidence that he was observed. Probably there was no need for it, his projected journey being well known to his hidden enemy.

Swiftly the express train sped over the fruitful plains of Illinois, making its way southward for hours along the banks of the slow current of the Illinois river.

Few words passed between them. They were both inclined to be silent, Sue sitting with her cheek resting upon her hand, her eyes fixed upon the swiftly flowing panorama of the stream and its level bordering lands.

"By Jove, I am getting tired of this!" remarked Will, kicking his heel restlessly on the floor. "Is this a part of the river? It has grown desperately wide."

"That is Peoria Lake," she answered without turning.

"Oh! and have we much further to go?"

"About ten miles beyond Peoria."

She relapsed into her former silence, a dark, gloomy expression upon her face as her eyes rested on the broad, smooth surface of the lake.

Will got up and walked the floor of the car impatiently. He was growing tired of her taciturnity.

The beautiful town of Peoria was left behind, and the train ran on beside the stream, into which the broad stretch of the lake now narrowed.

Will walked forward into the smoking-car, and smoked a cigar to quiet his restless nerves.

"Railroading always was a nuisance to me; and always will be," he grumbled. "To have to sit like a statue for hours, in one of those narrow seats! It is as bad as to be in the pillory. And what ails my companion? She is stricken with a most intense fit of silence. I suppose, though, that is half my fault, for I have had a fit of the blues."

Finishing his cigar he walked back through the train and took his seat beside his companion.

"We ought to be soon there now," he remarked.

"Yes, in about ten minutes."

"And is the home you speak of near the station?"

"Why no," she replied, looking around at him.

"We will have ten miles further to go. It will be necessary to have a conveyance of some kind."

"And can one be had in the town?"

"Oh yes! There will be no trouble about that."

She seemed inclined now to be talkative, and kept up a lively conversation until the train stopped, in a town of moderate size, situated close by the river banks.

In a half-hour more they were driving briskly southward, in a light vehicle, the driver of which seemed to have a deadly spite against his horses, by the way he plied the whip.

"It is a nipping air," remarked Will, as he felt the keen bite of the January frost. "I hardly fancy that I would enjoy many miles of this sort of experience."

"You don't know much of Illinois, that is evident," she answered. "Why this is angelic to the way we sometimes have it."

"Then the less I have of it the better I will like it," he responded. "I don't care to have old zero blowing in my face at the rate of fifty miles an hour. Is it a town to which we are going? or a country residence?"

"Well, I declare!" she laughed. "I have been waiting to hear something of that sort. I doubt if you have the bump of curiosity very strongly developed. Here we are within two miles of the place, and you are just beginning to wonder where you are going to."

"Oh, but then, I was sure you would be there. That was enough for me. Love, you know, can build a palace in a desert."

She pursed her lips in a pouting fashion.

"Well, go on, if you have any more pretty speeches of that sort," she replied. "But you must not expect me to repay them back in kind."

"Why not, pray?"

"Because I fancy that there is little love lost on either side. And I do not care to jest on that subject."

"You are a queer creature," said Will, surprised at her grave accent. "Suppose I should say, then, that I meant nothing by it. Would you believe me?"

"Of course I would. I have heard lies by the

ocean on the other side of the story. It is refreshing to hear a word of truth on that side."

"Here we are," said the driver, drawing up his horses before an ample stone mansion which lay near the bank of the river. It was neither a rural nor a town residence. At some distance beyond it appeared the buildings of a small village, but this edifice stood alone, in the midst of a neglected garden plot.

Will looked in some surprise at the establishment. He had thought of some cosy little village residence, but not of such a pretentious edifice as this.

"Is it not neat and pretty, as I told you?" she asked, after the coachman had been dismissed, and they had entered the house. "This window, you see, looks upon the river. From this side view we have the village, which you must acknowledge is a very pretty one. And look at my pictures, Will. I am rather proud of them."

Will looked with interest around the room. It was furnished at considerable expense, and with excellent taste. Some costly books lay upon the table. The pictures she referred to were figure paintings, some of them having considerable merit.

Will leaned back easily in the comfortable reception chair in which he had seated himself.

"How in the world did a bird of passage like you fly into such a cage as this?" he asked curiously. "Is this—a slight shudder came upon him. "Did Wetherly feather this nest?"

"No more of that, sir," she replied, drawing herself up with dignity. "I fancy that it is no affair of yours how I came by it. And I have already told you that I came here to escape from him."

"And I came here to learn about him," Will quietly rejoined.

"Yes. When the cash is paid which you agreed upon."

"You can trust me for that. I will have it deposited wherever you say, and it shall be yours as soon as I hear that he is in the hands of the police."

"You will not trust me, then? Why should I trust you?"

"Your life and mine have been different, Sue Dempster. I have the right to demand more from you than you have from me."

A look of anger came into the woman's eyes. There was a slight flush of red in her cheek as she answered:

"My experience of young men of your calibre, sir, has not given me a very high opinion of their honor. But no matter, you shall know, before you sleep to-night, the assumed name of your foe. I shall put myself to that extent in your power, and trust that much in this boasted honor."

"Which never failed yet; and which will not fail now," he proudly replied.

It was now late in the day. Will looked curiously about the place, after changing his traveling clothes, and freshening himself up after his journey.

There seemed to be other residents in the house. A very appetizing supper was set for the hungry travelers. Sue had changed her traveling attire, and was dressed in a pretty evening garb, which made her look fascinatingly beautiful.

The charm of her face was added to by a hectic flush in her cheek, and by a brilliant luster in her eyes. It seemed as if some excitement within was producing its influence upon her expressive face.

The evening passed pleasantly to Will, his companion being excited and brilliant in conversation, talking away with a laughing haste that was almost hysterical.

"You must be tired. I know I am," she said, as she led the way through an up-stairs corridor. "This is your room. I hope you will have satisfactory dreams."

Will noticed something odd and peculiar in her voice as she spoke these words. He turned, after crossing the threshold of the room, and slightly started on seeing her face. It seemed suddenly transformed, the cheeks suffused, the teeth displayed, the eyes glaring. It was a tigerish countenance which he saw in that momentary glimpse, for the next instant she had slammed the door violently to, and he heard the sharp thud of a bolt, as it was driven home into its socket.

"Trapped!" came to his ear in a shrill tone from beyond the door, while a burst of harsh laughter came from her lips. "I told you you should have that name before you slept, Will Wildfire. This is the name: Robert Wilson. He resides at 50 Marston street, Chicago. Ha! ha! my threwd detective! Make the most of it. But I fancy that he will be far away before you get a chance to harm him. And as for your base bribe, you can fling it into the sea. You did not know Sue Dempster when you tried to buy her."

Will heard her steps receding from his door, while that hysterical laugh still resounded. He tried the door. It would not yield to his utmost strength. He ran to the windows. They were crossed by strong iron bars.

He was indeed trapped.

CHAPTER XII.

CHECKMATE TO SUE DEMPSTER.

MORNING dawned on the sleepless eyes of the prisoner. If ever a newly-caged lion raged and ramped in its close confines, Will Wildfire had raged that night. The strength of the bolts and bars which confined him was sorely tried, but they resisted his utmost efforts. Now a cry of rage left his lips, now a burst of hollow laughter. Again, flinging himself upon the bed, he would sink into an hour of feverish slumber. It was a new experience for him to have the least constraint put upon his movements, and his impatient temper would have torn the walls of the room into splinters but that they were too strong for his efforts.

It was a bleak January morning that dawned over the broad plains of central Illinois. A wind soured dimly through the trees, whose bare limbs almost swept the windows of his room. The sky was overcast. As he looked, the first flakes of a snow-storm came drifting downward through the air, to be caught by the winds, and whirled in white wreaths hither and thither. On the frozen ground a white curtain soon spread, hiding the dark surface from view.

But the room in which Will was imprisoned was well warmed, the heat coming up to it from below.

"She is not going to freeze me, at any rate," he growled. "I wonder if she intends a course of slow starvation, or how else she will dispose of the unmitigated fool who has trusted himself into her hands?"

He walked to the window and examined it more closely. It was crossed by a range of iron bars, some eight inches apart, and too strong to be moved or bent. Beyond these were glazed sashes, through which he had a long view over the country.

A sort of garden plot extended in the rear of the house for some hundred yards, where it was bordered by a country lane, which ran to the village, some of whose outlying houses could be seen from a corner of the window.

Beyond this lane spread broad fields, with an occasional farm-house visible in the distance. The snow was now falling more rapidly, and the whole country, as far as the eye could reach, was growing whitened under its chill carpet.

No human being was visible. No sign of life appeared, except a few half-frozen chickens and a stray dog, who looked miserably cold as he trotted away in search of some shelter.

A noise behind him called Will's attention from the window. He quickly turned, and found that a trap in the center of the floor had opened, and hung down like a small shelf. Upon it were the materials for a frugal breakfast.

"It is not going to be a case of starvation, then," he muttered. "Bless her for that much, anyhow, for I am as hungry as a wolf. I hope the breakfast is not physicked, in Dr. Tod's fashion. I heard him teaching her the trick. But a fellow might as well be poisoned as starved, so here goes."

He removed the waiter of food from the shelf, which at once flew back into its place, through the action of a strong spring. Will stared.

"Hang it!" he growled. "This thing seems to be got up to order. I wonder how many more trusting young gentlemen have been locked in here before?"

He ate his breakfast, however, with an appetite which nothing could diminish. That duty disposed of, he walked the room impatiently for a half hour, and then threw himself upon the bed, where his eyes soon closed in sleep.

In fact, his nervous excitement had exhausted him, and his whole system needed the aid of slumber.

When he awoke it was long past noon. He cast a glance from his half-opened eyes around the room. On the table where he had left the remnants of his breakfast were the materials for an abundant dinner. Will rose on his elbow and stared at this food, and then at the door.

"So I have had a call," he ejaculated. "Why didn't they waken me up? I should have liked to do the honors of my room. But I must say that my sweet tempered keeper is bound to see that I am kept well fed; and, as long as no other amusement offers, I cannot do better than dine in solitary state."

He walked first to the window, however, and looked out. The snow was still falling, but more slowly than before, and it now covered the ground to a thickness of several inches.

Two half-grown boys were wading across the garden at no great distance from his window. A thought suggested itself to Will. Throwing up the sash and resting his face against the bars, he called the boys in a low tone.

They started, and looked around in affright. On seeing Will's face at the window they seemed inclined to run.

"It is the crazy gentleman," said one of them, fearfully. "Let's streak it, Dan."

"But he can't get out," returned Dan.

"So," said Will, to himself, "that explains the bolts and bars. I am occupying the dungeon of a crazy man. There is no use to call for help here. People would as soon help a wild beast out of its cage, as aid me to escape from this den."

The boys still stood irresolute, casting curious glances up at the window.

"I am not crazy, boys," remarked Will, in a quiet tone. "Do you belong to the village?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is there a telegraph office there?"

"I guess there is."

"And do you want to make a dollar?"

The eyes of the boys glistened.

"You bet we do," they answered together.

"Then I want you to take a telegraph message from me to the office and ask the operator to send it to its destination. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," returned the boy.

"Wait a minute, then."

With a gleam of hope Will withdrew from the window, and searched in his pockets for a pencil and a scrap of white paper. After a minute's hesitation he wrote the following dispatch:

"JOSEPH PLUME,
CENTRAL POLICE STATION,
CHICAGO.

"I am in trouble here. Send an officer down to stone house, near Lafayette village, on the Illinois. Also to 50 Marston St., Chicago. Robert Wilson is the name of your man. WILL WILDFIRE."

Wrapping the paper round a couple of silver dollars, Will returned to the window, and saw the boys still waiting in the snow outside. It needed no call to attract their attention, for their eyes were eagerly and somewhat fearfully fixed upon this window.

"Ready, boys?"

"Yes we are, sir."

"Then catch this."

He flung the package down into the snow. In a moment the larger of the two boys had it in his grasp.

"There are two dollars there, boys. You can pay for the message and keep the change for yourselves. And hark you. Tell the operator to ask for an answer. When you bring that to me I will give you as much more. You understand?"

"It's queer if we don't," cried the boys, to whose eyes a silver dollar was as big as the wheel of a cart.

"Then be off like lightning. Look out that you make no mistake."

Will watched them until they had disappeared around the corner of the house. He then lowered the window with an air of great satisfaction.

"Checkmate to Sue Dempster," he said to himself. "Smart young lady as she is, I fancy that it is my game now."

He turned to the table, on which his dinner still awaited him.

"It will be a good hour, or maybe two, before I can get an answer from Chicago, I may as well dine in solitary grandeur while I am waiting."

Will ate that dinner with a good appetite. He could not, indeed, prevent himself from breaking out into an occasional laugh, when he thought how cleverly he had outplayed his antagonist in the game.

"That's a royal partridge," he remarked, as he carved the plump bird that lay in brown beauty before him. "And here's a juicy slice of roast-beef, in case I should have no fancy for bird. By Jupiter, if a fellow must play prisoner, he might thank his stars to have my luck in a keeper. If she only knew what a bird was at this minute flying to Chicago with news of her neat little game, I fancy she would have put gall in the sauce, and wormwood in the steak. You're a cunning trickster, Sue, but you haven't a fool to deal with."

By the time Will had finished his dinner there was nothing but empty plates left in witness of the vanished meal.

"There, I fancy I can safely go hungry for the next twenty-four hours," he said, as he walked the floor, with an occasional errand to the window, to see if, by any possibility, the boys could be yet returned.

He had lingered over his dinner, so that it was now more than an hour since they had started with the message. But to Will's impatient spirit the minutes almost seemed hours.

"But I am in a ridiculous hurry," he ejaculated, throwing himself heavily into a chair by the bed. "I may have to wait these three hours for an answer."

The position which he now occupied brought him directly facing the door. He lifted his eyes negligently. What was his astonishment to see the trap fallen, and the face of Sue Dempster at the opening?

Will sprang to his feet with an impulse of fury. He took a quick step forward, and seized one of the empty plates on the table, with intent to hurl it at that smiling, hateful face.

She did not move, and he dropped it again with a sense of shame.

"I hope you enjoyed your dinner, Mr. Wildfire," she asked, with a mocking smile.

"Oh, excellently," answered Will, bowing with exaggerated courtesy.

"But you have not had the dessert."

"I can do very well without it."

"Oh no! A dinner is nothing without dessert. I have brought it to you. I hope you may highly enjoy it."

She extended her hand through the opening. From her open fingers a scrap of paper fluttered to the floor. A laugh of mockery broke from her lips as the trap flew back sharply to its place.

Will sprang hastily forward and seized the paper. What in the world could it be? Was it the offer of a bribe which he had sent her in Chicago, returned in this manner?

The thought of the truth did not enter his mind until he had opened the crushed scrap and fixed his eyes upon its contents. What was his astonishment to see the message, which he had fondly fancied on its way to its destination! Either the boys had betrayed him, or they had been captured and robbed of their charge.

Will sunk back in his chair, his eyes fixed in gloomy abstraction upon the floor. Here was a sudden shattering to his hopes which stunned him for a moment. And the feeling that struggled through his mind was not alone that of disappointment at his failure. A stronger sense was that of shame and anger at being outgeneraled by this woman. After all his fancied sharpness, and when he most felicitated himself on having deceived and checkmated her, to have this trump card played back upon him! It is no wonder that an oath of startling magnitude burst from his lips, or that he felt an impulse to dash his head against the wall, in sheer disgust at his own failure.

He finally threw himself upon the bed, and lay there for several hours in deep despondency, though it must be admitted that he slept part of his time.

From one of these fits of dozing a slight sound awakened him. His opened eyes fell first upon the table. The dishes he had left there were gone. Then his gaze turned to the door, through which he caught

a glimpse of a person, just passing, with these dishes.

Will half rose in bed, a slight noise coming from his lips. The man in the door looked around upon him, and a sudden start went through both their frames at this sight of each other's face. For Will recognized the countenance of Neil Dempster, the gambler and road-agent! And Neil knew at a glance the face of the man who had rescued him from a horrible death!

CHAPTER XIII.

AN EARLY MORNING START.

THE door closed. It was but a momentary glance, yet it had made a marked difference in the state of affairs.

This man certainly could not be hostile to him who had saved his life. His look certainly had not shown enmity. Will could not but hope that he had gained a friend, and that he would soon be released from his hateful prison.

But what did the gambler do there? It was easy to understand that he had found it advisable to leave Gulchville, at short notice, after his effort at highway robbery. And then the name! Could he be a brother to Sue Dempster? This seemed the most reasonable explanation of his presence here, in league with the female jailer.

Will waited anxiously for further developments. He realized, after the failure of his previous effort, that he had a shrewd and cunning foe to deal with. But she could not know of his former connection with Neil Dempster, and he could not but hope in this man's gratitude.

Will sat for a full hour with his eyes fixed upon the trap in the door, determined that it should not open this time without his knowledge.

At the end of that time a light step was heard in the passage without. Then came the quiet withdrawal of a bolt, and the trap silently descended. The materials for his supper were placed upon it.

Starting hastily up, Will crossed the floor almost at a step, and looked eagerly out through the open trap. It was as he hoped. There appeared the face of Neil Dempster, looking with equal interest in upon him.

"You have not forgotten me?" exclaimed Will.

"Hist!" replied the other, with his finger at his lip. "Why are you here?" he asked in a low tone.

"Is it a lie, then, that you are insane?"

"I will be, if I stay here much longer," replied Will. "But I fancy that I have my senses yet. But what am I to understand? Is this a private insane asylum?"

"It has been used for that purpose."

"And is that the game that Miss Sue Dempster has played on me then? So there would be no use to call for help here?"

"Very little, I fancy."

Will was startled at this information. It at once cleared up the whole mystery of his incarceration, and of the flight of the boys on seeing him.

"Do you believe this nonsense?" asked Will, in the same low tone as before.

"I imagine that it is one of Sue's old tricks," came the reply. "What have you done to her?"

"Nothing. But I owe no love to one of her intimate friends."

"Ah! I see. And if out of this you would not seek to injure her?"

"Injure her? Why, I admire her too much for that. Not in the way of love, you know, but I like to see one fight hard for their friends."

"Then I will see that you escape. I owe you a debt of gratitude which I am glad of a chance to repay. Not now, you understand. But try your door at an early hour to-morrow morning. Hush! Not another word. I have been here too long."

The next moment he had glided away from the door, leaving Will with a new feeling of hope and expectation.

That he enjoyed the supper left him it is not necessary to state. He had good reason for a good appetite, though he would probably have had it in any case for he was not the person to let a touch of trouble injure his digestion.

He slept, too, much more soundly than he had done the previous night, though he walked the floor heavily for an hour or two before lying down, thinking it as well to give the impression that he was still restless and impatient.

"They have played their last card," he said, with a stern accent. "It will be my turn next. We will see who wins the game in the end. The shade of my murdered love still calls upon me for revenge, and I will have it, if Robert Wetherly yet remains upon the earth."

He awoke the next morning while it was yet dark. Walking quietly to the window he could perceive by a faint red streak to the east that day was approaching. It was within an hour of sunrise.

Quietly dressing, he took his shoes in his hand, and approached the door with a cautious step. But his heart beat fiercely with anxiety as his hand touched the latch. Could he trust this ex-gambler and robber? Was it possible that any sense of honor or gratitude could dwell in such a man?

With a feeling divided between hope and fear he softly turned the knob of the door-latch, and pressed upon the door. It yielded. In a moment it stood wide open. Freedom lay before him.

A strong throb of feeling ran through Will's frame. He drew back a step involuntarily as his eyes traced the depths of the dark passage. It was a natural sensation, but the next instant he grasped the handle of a small pistol that lay in his pocket and stepped boldly outward.

"It will be more than one man that puts me back

into the dungeon," he said to himself grimly. "And somebody will be hurt before it happens."

Walking in his stocking feet he felt his way cautiously along the dark passage. Not a glimmer of light came into it, and in what direction to go he hardly knew. He had a dim recollection of the route he had taken to reach his room, but it was no easy matter to retrace his steps in that pitch darkness.

He kept his hand upon the wall, as he stole along, hoping in this manner to reach the opening at the head of the stairs. Suddenly the wall ceased, his hand sunk into an open space; a door which stood slightly ajar flew open at his touch. A room lay before his eyes in which a dim light burned. He could see the faint outlines of a bed.

At that instant he felt a hand touch his arm. It startled him so that he almost dropped the shoes, which he held tightly clutched in that hand. At the same moment he drew his right hand which held the pistol, from his pocket, and turned fiercely toward his supposed assailant.

"Hist!" came a whisper in his ear. "You are venturing into the den of the lioness. That is Sue Dempster's room."

Will stepped hastily back. It was the voice of the gambler.

"Where are the stairs?" he asked, in the same whispered tone.

Without replying Neil grasped his arm and led him away from the dangerous locality. In a minute more he had placed his feet upon the first step of the stairs.

"It is plain sailing now," whispered Neil. "A straight passage from the stairs leads to the front door. Good-by. I have paid my debt. If you get into trouble again you will have to fight your own way out."

"It's a bargain," answered Will. "We will cry quits on this game."

All these words had passed in a low whisper. He felt under his feet the first steps of the stairs, and passed down them with careful tread, growing inwardly at those startling creaks which the best constructed stairs will give whenever one is particularly anxious for silence.

But the hall at the bottom was soon reached, and a few steps along this brought him to the front door. Pausing now to put on his shoes, he carefully turned the key in the lock of this door. In a moment more the door stood open, and he had stepped out into the open air.

The dawning of day had progressed considerably since his glance at the horizon from the window of his room. The dim glow which showed then had now changed into a broad gleam, covering the whole horizon, and reflected from the white coating with which the ground was thickly covered.

It had long since ceased to snow, and a path was trodden from the house toward the village. On this Will set his feet, with a broad, free swing, and a deep breathing of the frosty air which tasted like rich wine to him. To step from the confines of a locked room and find the whole world before you; to exchange the close atmosphere of a dungeon for the freedom of the outdoor air; it would stir the most sluggish soul, and it was to Will's ardent nature, as if he had just stepped out of the galling chains of slavery.

There was now no hindrance to his sending his telegram to Chicago, and this was the first duty he attended to as soon as the telegraph office had opened in the morning.

"Send the answer to the hotel if it comes before I call again," he said to the operator.

This duty performed, he returned to the small specimen of a hotel which did duty for the village of Lafayette and ordered breakfast.

There were some curious looks cast at Will, both by the people of the town and by the folks at the hotel. These looks, however, troubled him but little. They might fancy him an escaped lunatic, or whatever else they pleased, but he had made his mind up that no one would get him back to the establishment from which he had escaped without a few bullets first being spilled.

It was two good hours after he had finished his breakfast before there came an answer to his telegram. Then a boy brought the message to the bar-room of the hotel, where Will was diligently reading the advertisements in a week-old Chicago newspaper.

He hastily flung down the paper and seized the message brought him, tearing it open with a feverish hand.

The contents were as follows:

"Will Wildfire, Lafayette, Illinois:

"Have tried 50 Marston street, but the bird has flown. Robert Wilson left Chicago by rail at an early hour this morning. Do not know yet by what line, but think by the same line which you took. If so, he should reach Peoria near twelve. Look out for this train. You may find him on it."

"JOSEPH PLUME."

Reach Peoria by twelve! It was now nearly eleven! And the nearest station upon that road was ten miles away! What was to be done?

"Landlord!" cried Will, in a sharp voice.

"Ay! ay!" came the answer. "What is wanted?"

"Have you got a good sleigh, and a lively horse, or pair of horses?"

"I'd bet high to beat anything on the road," replied the landlord.

"Then gear them up quick as lightning. I will double your price if you get me away from this town inside of ten minutes. Look alive now, there's no seconds to waste."

"It's as good as done," exclaimed the host, running from the room.

In seven minutes' time a light sleigh was pulled up at the door, drawn by a pair of spirited horses.

Will sprang, with a quick bound into the seat. The driver shook the reins. They were off like the wind.

Scarcely a minute elapsed ere they came in front of the stone house by the river. Will's quick eyes caught the figure of Sue Dempster on the porch.

"Slack up," he said to the driver.

His fair foe looked around as the sleigh slowed up before the porch, but her face grew deadly pale, and the eyes seemed as if they would start from her head, when she perceived the form of Will Wildfire erect in the sleigh, his hat in his hand.

"I am off for Chicago," he cried. "Has Miss Sue Dempster any commands?"

She reeled as if she would have fallen, and clutched the porch with a nervous grip, while her staring eyes followed the sleigh, whose horses were again off at a racing gallop.

CHAPTER XIV.

WETHERLY'S LAST CARD PLAYED.

The light sleigh flew onward like the wind. The two spirited horses which drew it were young and swift-footed, and they darted over the level road at a speed that soon left the miles of the journey trailing far behind them. The driver, stirred up by the promise of a gratuity from his passenger, roused them by voice and whip until the wind of their swift passage cut the faces of the two men like a knife. But the chill of the atmosphere, almost at its zero point, had little effect upon Will, whose blood boiled with impatience within him.

Twelve o'clock had not sounded when they drove through the streets of the small town and drew up at the railroad station. Will sprang at a bound from the sleigh, and ran hastily to the platform.

"The express from Chicago—has it passed yet?"

"No. It is not due for ten minutes," answered the station agent.

"Does it stop here?"

"Only on flag signal."

"Then, for Heaven's sake, flag it! I must make that train, or something is bound to burst."

"You seem to be in a hurry, sir," replied the man, curiously.

"Yes, to get aboard that train. I have a matter of business to settle there," answered Will, as he turned away, and proceeded to settle with the driver of the sleigh. As he did so, the train-whistle sounded in the distance.

Soon it appeared, rounding a slight curve some distance in advance. Will looked anxiously toward the flagman. But all was right. The folds of the red signal flag waved open in the wind. The train slowed up as it came near the station.

"All aboard!" cried the conductor, springing to the platform. "We have not a second to spare. Are five minutes late now?"

"Drive ahead then," answered Will, leaping to the steps of the nearest car.

A short, snarling whistle from the engine; the rumble of wheels upon the track; and in a minute the train was regaining its lost speed, with one more passenger on board.

Will took the nearest seat that offered. He had been driving at such a breakneck rate during the whole morning, and had been in such a whirl of excitement, that a natural revulsion came upon him, and he felt that a short rest was necessary, in order to regain the tone of his faculties.

And with this revulsion came a sense of fear and doubt. It was by no means certain that his foe was on the train. What if he had taken some other route, and escaped him? What if his year's efforts had all been in vain, and a long, weary round of search lay again before him?

Will Wildfire was not the man to long bear such a feeling of uncertainty. This doubt must be settled, and in short measure. If his foe was not on board, then the search must go on. If he was on board, then—But what would happen then was in the hands of fate. Yet the firm, hard set of the lips, the steel-like glitter in the eye of the young athlete, as he sprang hastily to his feet, indicated that his measures would be swift, sharp and decisive.

The train had now regained its full speed, and was, in fact, running beyond schedule time, in order to regain its lost minutes. It darted over the snowy plain at the speed of some forty-five miles per hour. Nor had it the smooth bed of some of our eastern roads. It was a staggering passage that Will made to the rear of the train, scanning the face of each passenger as he did so.

It was in vain. No face like that of Robert Wetherly appeared. He turned and retraced his steps. Approaching the forward part of the train he was stopped as he sought to enter one of the cars.

"Excuse me," said the colored attendant, "but this is the parlor car. Have you a ticket?"

"No."

"Then you cannot come in here."

"What is the extra charge?" asked Will.

"One dollar."

"Then slide and let me pass."

He pressed a dollar into the attendant's hand. The colored gentleman instantly withdrew his opposition, and politely bowed Will into the car. It was doubtful if the company would receive any dividends from that dollar.

The car was fitted with revolving arm-chairs for seats, and had large single squares of plate-glass for windows with all the other requisites of a first class parlor car. It was not greatly patronized, however, as only some seven or eight passengers occupied its seats.

Several of these looked around on Will's entrance. A single glance told him that the person he sought was not among these. But there were two or three passengers near the forward part of the car who had not stirred. On one of these, only the back of whose head was visible, Will fixed his eyes with a stern look. There was something in the shape of the head which reminded him of the man of whom he was in search.

This car ran rather more steadily than the others through which he had come, and he walked forward with a steady step, his eyes fixed with the glance of the basilisk on the head of the unconscious passenger.

Just as he reached this seat, however, there came a sudden lurch of the car, which sent Will staggering against the revolving chair.

The passenger turned angrily around, with a harsh observation upon his lips.

It froze there when he saw the face of the man before him. For this man was Will Wildfire the seeker for revenge! And the other was Robert Wetherly, the fugitive murderer!

It is no wonder that the face of the villain grew deathly pale, and that his frame trembled as in an ague-fit.

Nor is it strange that Will, too, trembled while the pallor, not of fear, but of passion, spread over his face.

"So," he cried, in hoarse tones. "My long search is then over? I have you, murderer, before me? By all the gods, you shall not escape me again!"

These last words came with a hiss from his lips, so intense was the passion with which they were spoken.

"What do you mean, fellow? I do not know you," answered Wetherly, while he grasped the seat from which he had risen, for support.

"I know him, then, gentlemen," exclaimed Will, turning to the passengers, several of whom were upon their feet. "One year ago he murdered the woman to whom I was about being married. I have ever since been tracking him through the whole country. I have found him here, at last. He shall never escape me again until I deliver him into the hands of the hangman."

The passengers looked on with growing interest. Here was an unexpected scene. Some of them came nearer.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Wetherly, in a forced tone. "You put it on neatly, my friend. Gentlemen, I have here a telegram which I received at Peoria, warning me of a lunatic having escaped from the private asylum at Lafayette. This is the man. He is a dangerous maniac, and it is our duty to secure him."

As he spoke he sprang suddenly upon Will, grasped him around the arms, and called loudly to the others.

"I have him fast! Help me secure him! He will do us all a harm if he escapes!"

"Liar and villain!" thundered Will, breaking loose with one mighty effort, and dealing his foe a stroke that sent him staggering backward. "Back, gentlemen," he cried to the passengers. "It will be dangerous to the man who dares to touch me now!"

Wetherly's face was livid with rage as he recovered from the blow which had been dealt him. He sprang forward with a demoniac expression of face, the glitter of a steel blade gleaming in his hand. In an instant he had struck, and buried this blade to the hilt in Will's shoulder.

The wounded youth staggered, and grasped wildly at the seat for support. Then with one mighty effort of passion he darted upon his foe, lifted him like a reed from the floor, and flung him head-first at the plate-glass window of the car.

There was a shiver of broken glass, the vanishing of a dark form through the wide window, a hollow thud on the ground below; and then Will fell prostrate on the floor of the car, the blood gushing in torrents from his wound.

CHAPTER XV.

CONCLUSION.

WILL WILDFIRE had won his revenge. A fall from a train running at a speed of from forty to fifty miles per hour leaves little chance of escape with life.

He had gained his revenge; but it was doubtful if it had not cost him his own life. A fierce impulse of rage, a sudden dread that his foe would escape him by a double murder, had aroused him to his mighty effort of strength. But he now lay nerveless and weak, relapsing into insensibility as the blood continued to flow from his deep wound.

The excitement in the parlor car rapidly extended throughout the train. Among the passengers who crowded into the car were some medical persons, who at once took the wounded man in charge. They shook their heads as they looked at his hurt.

"It has escaped the lungs," announced one of them to the anxious passengers. "Youth and a good constitution may help the young man to recover. But I must freely express my doubts. If I had such a cut in me I would make my will before twenty-four hours."

The train had, meanwhile, backed to the scene of the encounter. Robert Wetherly was found where he had been flung, prostrate on a frozen bed of snow, whose surface he had hardly broken.

There was no mutilation of the body; scarce a drop of blood on the snow; and yet he was stone dead. The shock had killed him. No hurt had come to his physical frame, but the very central spring of life had ceased to act. The murdered Clara Moreland was revenged.

Our story is near its end. The hidden hand which had struck such deadly blows at Will Wildfire's life, had lost its power. Yet it was doubtful if its last blow would not prove a fatal one.

But Will did not think so. No vital organ had been touched, and, as the physician had said, youth and vitality came to his rescue, and a week had not passed before he showed definite signs of recovery.

Meanwhile the Chicago police were searching into the mystery which had surrounded the escaped murderer. It soon proved that, under an assumed name, he had been for six months or more in the city, during which time he had operated boldly and successfully on the stock board. At the first appearance of Will Wildfire on the scene Wetherly had entered into some heavy time transactions, which it would be ruinous for him to abandon. He had, therefore, probably engaged Dr. Tod to lure his foe away, and to put him out of the way for good if an opportunity offered.

This scheme failed, and Will returned to Chicago before the stock transactions matured. Feeling that Will was gradually approaching his track, through the medium of Sue Dempster, he had engaged this woman, who was devoted to him, to get Will out of the way temporarily in a mode of which the reader is aware.

During Will's detention the stock transaction had matured, with heavy profit to Wetherly. Hastily converting all his effects into cash he had at once left the city, telegraphing Sue to meet him at a certain place, and to leave Will Wildfire as an inmate of the private asylum.

But the best laid schemes of villains do not always work as they wish, and the chance gratitude of Neil Dempster, the gambler, had brought the murderer to an end of his deep-laid plans and of his despicable life.

Once on the mend Will Wildfire rapidly regained his health and strength. He submitted to a judicial examination for his action in the car, but it was so plainly a case of self-defense, and the sympathy of the judges was so strongly with him on learning all the circumstances of the case, that they had rather praise than blame for his action, and Will walked the streets of Chicago looked upon by many as a young hero.

As for the agents of the dead villain, Dr. Tod and Sue Dempster, they disappeared, and no one took much trouble to find them.

But Will remained the same athletic, free-hearted, sport-loving, genial fellow as we have always known him, and as we may find him again at some future time.

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